Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

3

MO DAO ZU SHI

MO XIANG TONG XIU

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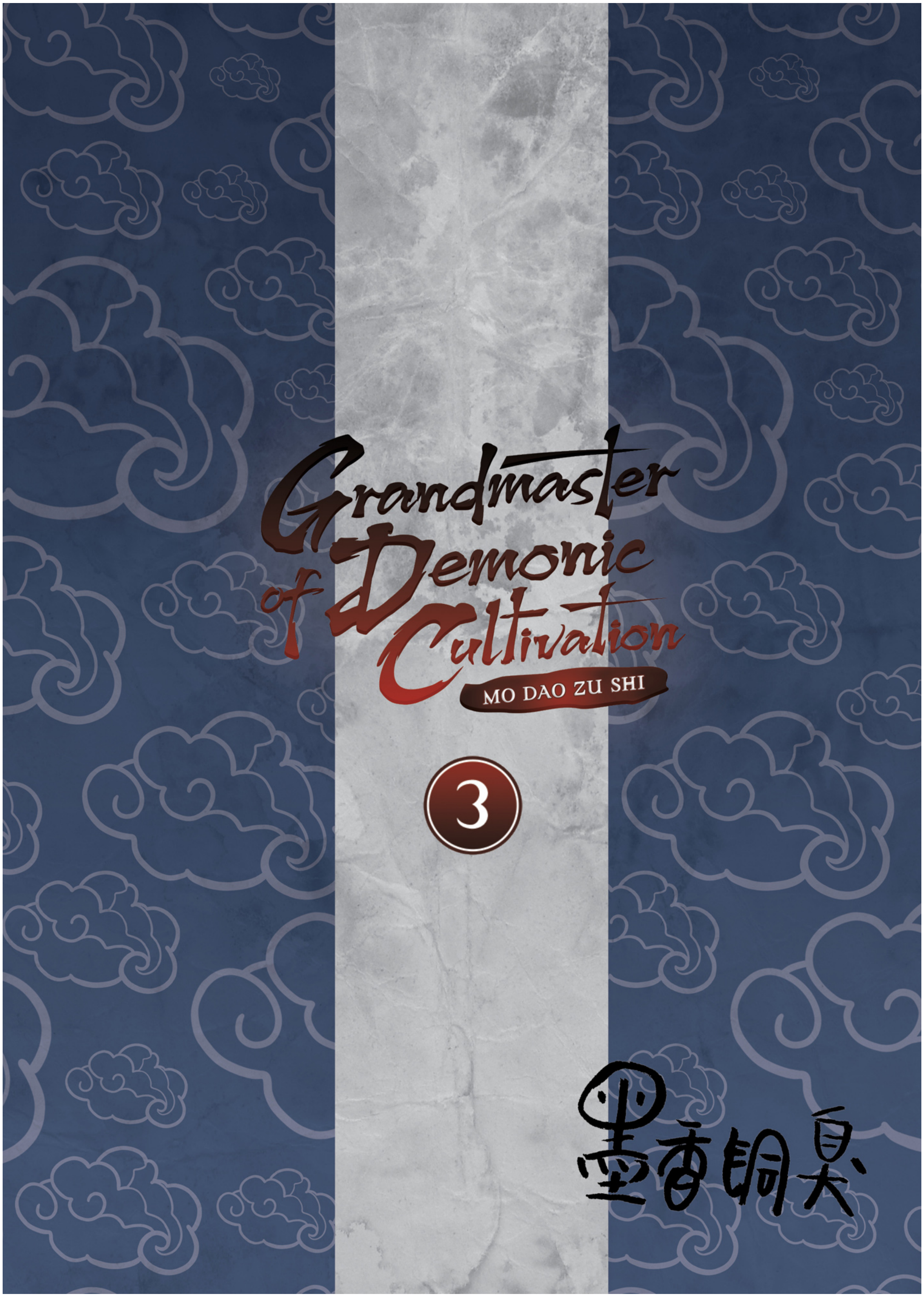

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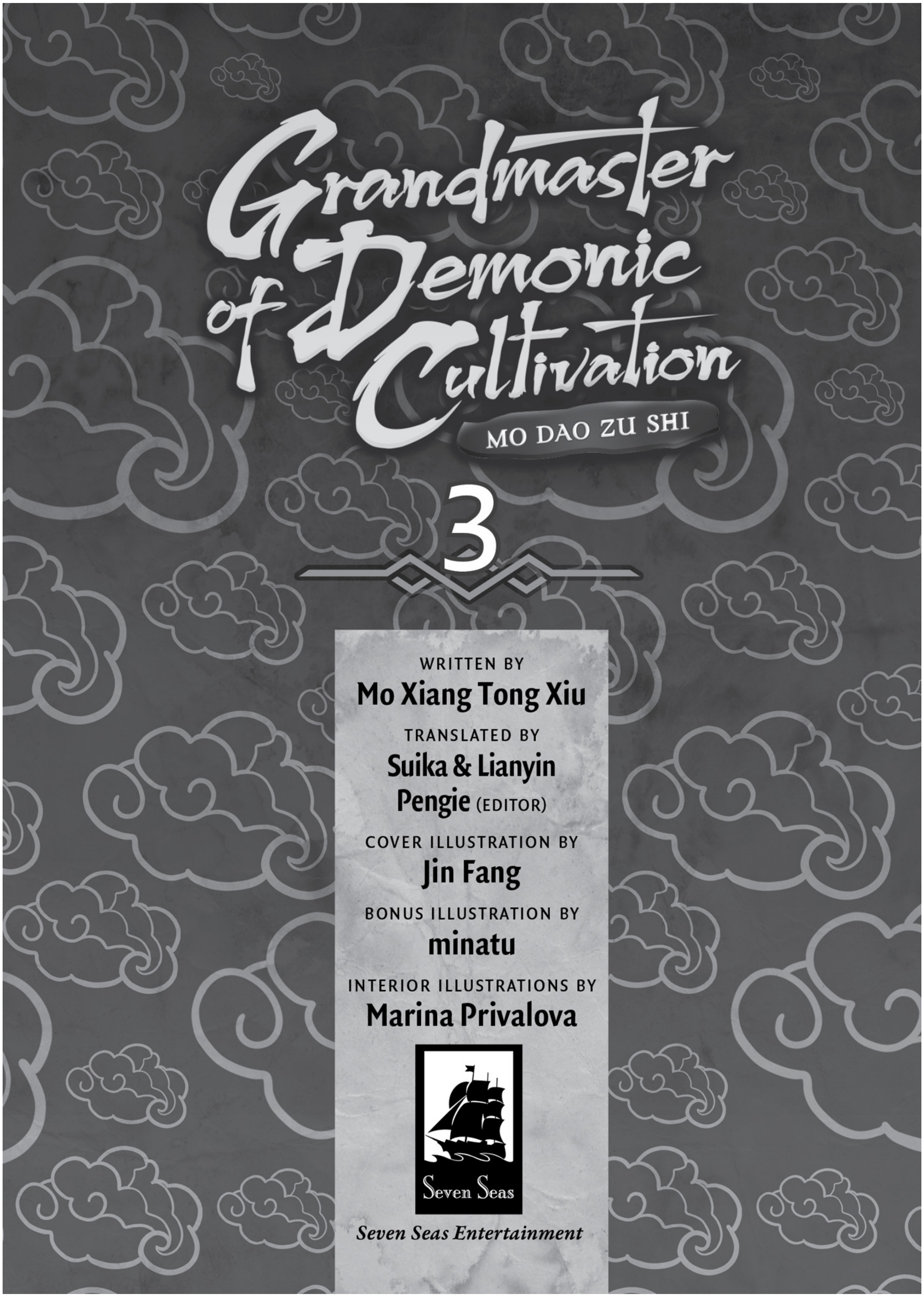

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WRITTEN BY
Mo Xiang Tong Xiu

TRANSLATED BY
Suika & Lianyin
Pengie (EDITOR)

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY
Jin Fang

BONUS ILLUSTRATION BY
minatu

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Marina Privalova

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Suika, Lianyin
EDITOR: Pengie
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Karis Page
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
IN-HOUSE EDITOR: Tamasha
BRAND MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
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GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION

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Chapter 11:
Supreme Courage

— Part 1 —

YUNMENG WAS A REGION replete with lakes, so it was only natural that the residence of the most prominent cultivation clan in the area, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, lay amongst the waters. That residence was known as Lotus Pier.

If one were to depart Lotus Pier and row along with the current, it wouldn’t take long to arrive at a large lake with a surfeit of lotuses, known as Lotus Lake. Pink blossoms with broad jade-green leaves rose from the depths of the lake, whose waters spanned hundreds of kilometers. When a breeze brushed past, the flowers swayed and quivered like they were nodding, giving the lovely scenery a sort of charming innocence.

Unlike other immortal residences, Lotus Pier was not far removed from the secular world. Ordinary folk were barred from even setting foot on the grand estates of other cultivation clans, but outside Lotus Pier’s main entrance were often a variety of small vendors doing roaring business in lotus pods, water chestnuts, and all sorts of pastries. Local children with snotty noses also sneaked into the drilling grounds to secretly spy on the disciples’ sword training. Even when they were inevitably discovered, they weren’t reprimanded—in fact, they were sometimes allowed to play with the Jiang Sect’s disciples.

When Wei Wuxian was young, he often shot kites by the shores of Lotus Lake.

Jiang Cheng kept a keen eye on his own kite but kept peeking at Wei Wuxian’s too. Wei Wuxian’s kite was already high in the sky, but he showed no sign of intending to reel it back. He shaded his eyes with his right hand and grinned up at it, seeming to think the kite still hadn’t flown far enough.

Seeing how his own kite was about to fly out of the range where he was certain he could shoot it down, Jiang Cheng clenched his teeth and nocked an arrow on his bow. He released the bowstring, and the white-feathered arrow shot forth with a whizzing noise. His kite was painted to resemble a strange one-eyed monster. When the arrow hit its mark, the kite fell to the earth. Jiang Cheng was clearly pleased, and his expression relaxed.

“Bullseye!” he exclaimed, then quickly asked, “Yours has already flown far, can you still manage to hit it?”

“Place your bets,” Wei Wuxian said.

Only then did he nock an arrow. He focused and aimed, drawing the bowstring to its full span. With a snap of his fingers, he let the arrow fly.

Bullseye!

Jiang Cheng’s brow wrinkled again, and he let out a snort. The group of boys packed up their bows and ran over to pick up their kites and tally their results. The one whose kite had fallen the nearest to the starting point was ranked in last place. Liu-shidi, the sixth-eldest of the shidi, earned this spot every time. He was teased with good-natured laughter as always, but he had very thick skin and didn’t care in the slightest.

Wei Wuxian’s kite had landed the farthest away. Right behind him, in second place, was Jiang Cheng’s. The two of them, feeling lazy that day, decided against running all the way out to pick up their kites. The group of boys charged onto the nine-turn bridge, that floated above the surface of the water like a blooming lotus, and were horsing around—leaping and flying off walls and roofs—when two lithe, graceful young women made an appearance.

The women were both dressed as combat-ready handmaids, and each wielded a shortsword. The taller of the two stopped the boys and presented the kite and arrow she held.

“To whom do these belong?” she coldly asked.

The boys all silently cursed at the sight of the two women. Wei Wuxian stroked his chin and stepped forward.

“They’re mine.”

The other handmaid humphed. “Well, aren’t you honest.”

The two handmaids each moved to one side. Behind them was a woman dressed in purple and bearing a sword.

The woman was fair of skin and fine in appearance, with noble eyes. But there was a sharpness to her features, and her lips were always curled into the ghost of a sneer—it was the look of a born cynic and thus very similar to Jiang Cheng. Her waist was slim, and her purple robes flowed gracefully as she moved. Her face and the right hand resting on the hilt of her sword were both as cold as jade, and on that hand’s index finger was a ring adorned with a purple crystal.

Jiang Cheng smiled at the sight of her. “Mom.”

Conversely, the rest of the boys greeted her with great respect: “Madam Yu.”

Madam Yu was indeed Jiang Cheng’s mother, Yu Ziyuan. She was, of course, also Jiang Fengmian’s wife, and the two of them had once been cultivation peers. Although she should have been known as Madam Jiang, everyone always called her Madam Yu. There was much speculation that Madam Yu disliked using her husband’s surname, due to her strong personality, but the couple never commented on the gossip either way.

Madam Yu came from the renowned Yu Clan of Meishan and was the third oldest of her siblings. Thus, she was also known as San-Niangzi, “Third Girl.” In the cultivation world, she was known as the Purple Spider. Just speaking that name aloud could strike fear into the hearts of many. Even in her youth, she possessed a cold personality and disliked fraternizing with others, so interactions with her were rarely pleasant. Even after marrying Jiang Fengmian, she didn’t enjoy being cooped up at Lotus Pier but spent most of her time venturing out into the wider world on Night Hunts. Moreover, her living quarters at Lotus Pier were separated from those of Jiang Fengmian. Her quarters formed a private area that housed herself and the relatives she had brought with her from the Yu Clan. The two young women with her now were named Jinzhu and Yinzhu, both handmaids and trusted aides who never left her side.

Madam Yu sent a look at Jiang Cheng. “Horsing around again? Come, let me have a look at you.”

Jiang Cheng scurried over, and Madam Yu squeezed his arm with her slender fingers before giving him a sound slap on the shoulder.

“Not a bit of progress in your cultivation. You’re almost seventeen and still acting like an ignorant child! Running around with this lot, doing mischief all day—do you think you’re the same as them? Hell knows which gutters they’ll be crawling in in the future, but you’ll be the leader of the Jiang Clan!”

Jiang Cheng staggered from the force of her slap. He hung his head, not daring to argue back. Wei Wuxian needed no confirmation to know that she was passive-aggressively insulting him again. One of his shidi secretly stuck his tongue out at him, and Wei Wuxian arched his eyebrows in response.

“Wei Ying, what are you up to now?”

As always, Wei Wuxian stepped forward, and Madam Yu continued to scold him.

“Acting like this again! Even if *you* don’t strive for any kind of personal improvement, don’t drag Jiang Cheng into your nonsense and lead him astray!”

“I don’t strive for improvement?” Wei Wuxian looked astonished. “I thought I was the most advanced student at Lotus Pier?”

Young people never liked to be scolded. They just *had* to talk back. Madam Yu looked murderous, but Jiang Cheng quickly intervened.

“Wei Wuxian, shut up!” He turned to Madam Yu. “It’s not that we *want* to laze around Lotus Pier shooting kites. But no one can go anywhere right now, can they? The Wen Clan claimed all the Night Hunt districts as their own when they drew their boundaries. Even if I wanted to go Night Hunting, there’s nowhere *to* go. Didn’t you and Father tell us to stay home instead of going in search of prey and provoking the Wen Clan’s wrath?”

Madam Yu snorted. “It seems you’re going to have to go whether you like it or not, this time.”

Jiang Cheng looked puzzled, but Madam Yu had already dropped the subject and stalked off down the long bridge with her head held high. The two handmaids shot death glares at Wei Wuxian before following.

When evening came, they learned what she had meant.

The Wen Clan of Qishan had sent an envoy with a message. It proclaimed that, due to the other clans' incompetence, the talent and potential of new disciples was being wasted. Therefore, the Wen Clan demanded that every one of these offending clans send at least twenty sect disciples to Qishan within three days. These disciples would be personally educated by specialists selected by the Wen Clan.

Jiang Cheng was flabbergasted. "The Wens actually *said* that? That's completely shameless!"

"They think they're the sun in the sky, shining down on all the other clans," Wei Wuxian drawled. "It's not like this is the first time the Wens have acted brazenly. They've been brandishing their size and power since last year, when they forbade other clans from going on Night Hunts. Look at how much prey and land they've stolen."

From the head of the hall, Jiang Fengmian chastised him. "Mind your words. Eat your food."

Only five of them were seated in the massive hall, each with a small square table laden with dishes in front of them. Wei Wuxian looked down. He had only just moved his chopsticks when he felt a tug on his sleeve, and turning, saw Jiang Yanli pass him a small plate. There were a number of lotus seeds upon it, the nuts plump and white, fresh and full, and freshly peeled just for him.

"Thanks, shijie," Wei Wuxian whispered.

Jiang Yanli responded with a smile, which added some vibrant color to her pleasantly unassuming appearance.

"What food?" Yu Ziyuan spat coldly. "Who knows if they'll be given anything to eat once they arrive at Qishan? Why not let them starve now so they get used to it?!"

The Wen Clan of Qishan's demand was one they could not refuse. There were countless examples of the fate that awaited any clan audacious enough to defy their orders. Such clans were declared guilty of any number of arbitrary criminal charges, like “rebellion” or “menace to the cultivation world,” and then openly and “justifiably” eradicated.

“Why so distressed?” Jiang Fengmian asked calmly. “No matter what the future holds, today’s meal still needs to be eaten…”

Madam Yu tried to hold herself back but could not. She smacked her palm on the table.

“Why so distressed?! Because to be distressed is to have *sense*! How can you be so indifferent at a time like this? Did you not hear what the Wen envoy said? Their lowly maid dared to act all high and mighty in front of *me*! The twenty disciples being sent must include representatives of the core family! Do you know what that means? A-Cheng or A-Li—one of them must be included! Why are they being sent? For education? Who are the Wens to dictate how other sects educate their own juniors?! Sending the children plays right into the Wens’ hands—they’ll make hostages of them!”

“Don’t be mad, Mom,” Jiang Cheng tried to interrupt. “Just me alone is enough.”

“Of course you’re the one going!” Madam Yu scolded him. “As if your jiejie can go? Look at her, still peeling lotus seeds so cheerfully! A-Li, stop peeling. Who are you peeling them for?! You’re a lady, not someone’s servant!”

Wei Wuxian heard that pointed word—“servant”—but didn’t care. He gobbled up all the lotus seeds on his plate in one go, mouth filled with refreshing sweetness as he chewed.

However, Jiang Fengmian looked up. “San-Niang.”

“Am I mistaken?” Madam Yu snapped. “You don’t like the sound of that word, ‘servant’? Let me ask you, Jiang Fengmian. Do you plan on having him go?”

“It depends on what he wants,” Jiang Fengmian replied. “He can go if he wants to.”

Wei Wuxian raised his hand. “I’ll go.”

“How lovely.” Madam Yu snorted. “Go if you want to, but you won’t be forced to if you don’t. Why is A-Cheng the one who *has* to go? Raising someone else's son like this—Sect Leader Jiang, what a good, generous man you are!"

There was resentment in her heart, and all she wanted was to set it free, heedless of whether her venting had either sense or reason. The others remained quiet, letting her blow off steam.

"San-Niangzi, you're tired," said Jiang Fengmian. "Why don't you go back and rest?"

Jiang Cheng, still sitting in his own spot, looked up at her. "Mom…"

Madam Yu rose to her feet and sneered. "What are you calling me for? Trying to be like your father and tell me to quiet down? You're an idiot. I've already told you, you'll never be able to compare to the one sitting next to you. You can't compete with him when it comes to cultivation, to Night Hunts, not even shooting a kite! It can't be helped. It's not your fault your mom can't compare to someone else's mom, after all. If you're no match for him, that's just how it is. Your mom is simply indignant on your behalf. How many times have I told you not to hang around with him? And yet you speak up for him! How did I give birth to a son like you?!"

She stalked out, leaving Jiang Cheng sitting there with his complexion turning a myriad of colors. Jiang Yanli quietly placed a plate of peeled lotus seeds on his table.

They sat there for a while before Jiang Fengmian broke the silence. "I will select another eighteen disciples tonight. You will all depart tomorrow."

Jiang Cheng nodded, unsure if he should say anything more. He never knew how to talk to his father.

Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, found it the most natural thing in the world. He finished his soup and asked, "Jiang-shushu, is there nothing you want to give us?"

Jiang Fengmian responded with a smile. "I gave them to you long ago. The swords at your sides, and our motto in your hearts."

"Oh!" Wei Wuxian said. "'Attempt the impossible,' right?"

"That motto doesn't mean you need to keep causing mischief when you already know you're getting in trouble for it!" Jiang Cheng immediately warned him.

With that, the mood in the dining hall finally livened up.

Prior to their departure the following day, Jiang Fengmian briefed them on necessary matters and then added one last thing: “The disciples of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng are not so weak that they cannot withstand a single storm in the outside world.”

On the other hand, Jiang Yanli followed them well down the road to see them off to her satisfaction, all the while stuffing everyone’s arms full of all sorts of dried foods, for fear that they wouldn’t be able to fill their stomachs at Qishan. The twenty youths departed Lotus Pier heavily laden with food and arrived at the education office designated by Qishan before the deadline.

A great number of disciples from prominent clans had arrived there, all of them juniors. Of the hundreds present, many were familiar faces. They gathered in groups of three to five and seven or eight, conversing in hushed voices. None of them seemed to be in a good mood, so they must have all been summoned in not-so-polite ways.

After looking around, Wei Wuxian commented, “So people from Gusu came too, as expected.”

For some reason, the boys sent by the Lan Clan of Gusu all looked rather haggard. Lan Wangji looked especially pale but still wore the same frosty expression that kept most people at arm’s length. With his sword Bichen strapped on his back, he stood there all alone with no one else around him.

Wei Wuxian wanted to go over and greet him, but Jiang Cheng warned, “Don’t start anything!” so he had to abandon the endeavor.

Suddenly, there was someone ahead loudly issuing orders for the disciples to assemble in proper formation before a tall platform. Several Wen Sect disciples walked over to bellow orders.

“Quiet, all of you! No talking!”

The one standing on the stage wasn’t much older than them. He appeared to be about eighteen or nineteen, and clearly considered himself quite important and superior to everyone else present. His face fell on the very outer borders of the realm of handsome, and the airs he put on were as greasy as his hair.

This youth was Wen Chao, the youngest son of the Wen Clan's leader. Wen Chao loved flaunting himself and took every opportunity to posture before other clans, so his face was not unfamiliar to anyone present. Two people stood on either side of him. At his left was an ostentatious young woman with a lithe and graceful figure, large eyes, arched brows, and lips as red as fire. The only blemish on her perfection was a black mole that sprouted above her lips in such an awful spot that it made one constantly itch to pick it off. At his right was a man who looked to be twenty or thirty, with a tall, broad build. Indifference shaded his expression, and the air around him was somber and cold.

Wen Chao stood high up the slope, looking smugly down at the crowd as he waved his hand. "As of now, you will turn in your swords!"

Uproar erupted amongst the gathered disciples.

"A sword never leaves a cultivator's side!" someone protested. "Why must we surrender ours?!"

"Who said that?" Wen Chao demanded. "Which clan are you from? Step forward!"

The one who had spoken held his tongue out of fear. Quiet returned once more below the platform, and Wen Chao was pleased.

"It's precisely because there are still those of you who don't know etiquette, don't understand subordination, don't comprehend the hierarchy among juniors from prominent clans! You are flawed at the root, and so I have resolved to educate you. Already, you are so ignorant and fearless—if I don't correct this now, it will result in people vainly challenging the authority of the Wen Clan to try and climb above our heads!"

Everyone knew full well that he demanded their swords with ill intentions. But the Wen Clan of Qishan was like the noonday sun, and every other family was teetering on thin ice. No one dared resist them in the slightest. If they should displease the Wen Clan in any way, they feared they would be convicted of some crime that would implicate their entire clan. They had no choice but to submit and endure it.

Jiang Cheng held Wei Wuxian down. "Why are you restraining me?" Wei Wuxian asked in a low whisper.

Jiang Cheng snorted. "In case you start something."

“You think too much,” Wei Wuxian said. “That guy’s so slimy, it makes me sick, but if I wanted to punch him, I wouldn’t pick a time like this to bring our family grief. Relax.”

“You wanna throw a sack over him and beat him up again?” Jiang Cheng asked. “That won’t work. You see that man next to Wen Chao?”

“Yeah,” Wei Wuxian replied. “He’s got high cultivation, but he looks aged, so he must have started training later in life.”

“That man is named Wen Zhuliu,” Jiang Cheng explained. “Also known as Core-Melting Hand. He’s Wen Chao’s personal attendant and is here specifically to protect him. Don’t provoke him.”

“Core-Melting Hand?” Wei Wuxian wondered.

“That’s right,” Jiang Cheng said. “Those hands of his are frightening. And he aids those evildoers. In the past, he helped Wen—”

They’d been conversing in low whispers while facing forward, so when they saw the Wen Clan servant who was collecting swords approach them, they immediately stopped talking. Wei Wuxian effortlessly untied the sword hung at his waist and handed it in. While doing so, he stole a glance over at the Lan Clan of Gusu. He’d thought Lan Wangji would refuse to turn in his sword for sure—but to his surprise, while Lan Wangji’s expression remained frighteningly frosty, he nonetheless unfastened his sword.

Madam Yu’s previous mockery had proved to be a prophecy. While they received “education” in Qishan, their fare was meager to say the least. All the food Jiang Yanli had stuffed their arms with was confiscated. As none of the young disciples had yet mastered inedia, this made their lives quite difficult.

The so-called “education” provided by the Wen Clan of Qishan consisted of distributing a book entitled *Quintessential Records and Quotable Characters of the Illustrious Wen*, which was crammed full of heroic tales and quotes from Wen Clan leaders and renowned cultivators throughout history. Everyone was given a copy and told to memorize the text well enough to recite sight unseen, keeping every single word in mind at all times. Every day, Wen Chao would stand above the crowd, give a speech, and then demand they all cheer for him. Every word they spoke and every action they took had to be inspired by his example.

During Night Hunts, he would command the disciples to scout ahead, clear the path for him, and draw the attention of nefarious creatures. The others would fight with everything they had, until Wen Chao popped up at the last second to land the final, easy strike against the yao beasts that they'd essentially already defeated. Then he'd cut off the yao's head and endlessly boast about how he'd singlehandedly won the trophy for himself. Anyone who rubbed him the wrong way would be singled out and yelled at in front of everyone, scolded so hard they were brought lower than livestock.

At the Grand Symposium hosted by the Wen Clan of Qishan a year ago, Wen Chao had entered the arena alongside Wei Wuxian and others during the archery event. He was wholeheartedly convinced he'd win first place and thought it only natural that everyone would concede to him. But of his opening three shots, one was on target, one fell short, and one hit a paper doll by mistake. He should've exited the arena immediately but obstinately refused, and no one had the nerve to tell him off.

Once the final tally came out, the top four were Wei Wuxian, Lan Xichen, Jin Zixuan, and Lan Wangji—and if Lan Wangji hadn't left the event early, he would have achieved an even better score. Wen Chao, humiliated, developed a bitter hatred for those four in particular. Lan Xichen hadn't been able to make it to this little "educational retreat," but Wen Chao unrelentingly harassed the other three, giving them tongue-lashings every day in public. Quite the demonstration of his might.

Jin Zixuan was the most aggrieved by the whole situation. He was a much-cherished child growing up, adored by his parents, and had never suffered such humiliation before. If it hadn't been for the other Jin Clan disciples holding him back, and if Wen Zhuliu wasn't such a deterrent, Jin Zixuan would've charged up to Wen Chao and snuffed out his life even at the cost of his own.

On the other hand, Lan Wangji looked like his heart was as calm as still water. He had assumed a state of complete indifference, as if his soul had left his body. Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, had spent years being tongue-lashed by Madam Yu at Lotus Pier. Each time he found himself descending the platform, he would laugh it off without a single care for Wen Chao's pathetic posturing.

Bright and early one fateful morning, the juniors were once again driven out of bed by the Wen servants and herded like livestock toward the location of the latest Night Hunt—Mount Muxi. The deeper they ventured into the mountain, the thicker the branches grew above their heads, and the deeper the shade grew beneath their feet. There was no sound aside from the whispering of leaves and their own footsteps. Swallowed by that dense silence, even birdsong or the chirping of insects seemed unusually loud.

After a long time, the group happened upon a small, gurgling stream. Scattered maple leaves were carried along by the current. The sound of the water and the color of the maple leaves subtly lifted the oppressive atmosphere; faint, merry laughter could even be heard up ahead.

As they walked, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng grumbled and cursed the Wen dogs under their breath in every way they could think of. With a careless glance behind him, Wei Wuxian saw a flash of white robes.

It was Lan Wangji. He had fallen a little behind the group, walking at a fairly slow pace.

Wei Wuxian had attempted to draw him into conversation many times over the last few days, wanting to catch up. But alas, every time Lan Wangji saw him, he would turn away. Furthermore, Jiang Cheng had warned him time and again not to tease Lan Wangji for no reason.

Now that the other boy was so nearby, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but unconsciously examine him. Suddenly, he noticed Lan Wangji's gait was strange. He was clearly *trying* to walk normally, but Wei Wuxian could tell he set his right leg more gingerly to the ground than his left, like he couldn't put any weight on it.

At the sight of this, Wei Wuxian slowed his pace and deliberately fell behind to walk by Lan Wangji's side. "What's wrong with your leg?"

Lan Wangji's eyes remained fixed ahead. "Nothing."

"We're pretty well acquainted, aren't we?" Wei Wuxian wheedled. "So cold, not sparing me a look at all. Is your leg really all right?"

"We are not well acquainted," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian spun around to walk backward, quite determined that Lan Wangji look at his face. “Don’t act tough if something’s wrong. Is your leg injured? Broken? When did it happen?”

He was about to ask if Lan Wangji wanted him to carry him when something fragrant caught his nose. Wei Wuxian craned his neck to look at the path ahead, and his eyes lit up.

Seeing him shut up so suddenly, Lan Wangji looked over as well, following his gaze to spot a group of around five girls walking together. The one in the middle was dressed in a light scarlet outer robe with a thin overcoat. The gauzy fabric fluttered with the gentle breeze and contoured her strikingly lovely figure. And that figure was what had caught Wei Wuxian’s eye.

“Mianmian, that perfume sachet of yours is amazing! Once you took it out, the bugs stopped pestering us in an instant,” one of the girls chuckled. “The scent is nice too. It clears the mind.”

When the girl they’d called “Mianmian” spoke, her voice was as soft and tender and sweet as the meaning of her name. “The sachets are filled with chopped medicinal herbs. There are many uses for them—I’ve got more sachets here, do any of you want one?”

Wei Wuxian glided over like a gust of evil wind. “Mianmian, save one for me too.”

That girl jumped in surprise at a stranger unexpectedly barging into their conversation. She looked back, revealing a pretty face to match her figure. With a slightly furrowed brow, she demanded, “Who are you? Why are you also calling me Mianmian?”

Wei Wuxian smiled. “I heard them call you Mianmian, so I thought that was your name. What, is it not?”

Lan Wangji looked on with cold indifference. Jiang Cheng noticed Wei Wuxian getting up to his usual nonsense again and rolled his eyes dramatically.

Mianmian blushed and exclaimed, “You can’t call me that!”

“Why not?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Why don’t we do this, then—tell me your real name, and I won’t call you Mianmian. How’s that?”

“Why do I have to tell you my name just because you asked?” Mianmian countered. “Why don’t you give *your* name before asking others for theirs?”

“My name’s easy; listen closely now.” Wei Wuxian beckoned her close. “My name is Yuandao.”

Mianmian repeated the name twice in her head. She couldn’t recall any young masters from prominent clans with that name, but judging by his bearing and manners, this young man didn’t appear to be a nobody. Puzzled, she stared at the teasing smile on Wei Wuxian’s lips.

Suddenly, Lan Wangji’s cold, quiet commentary came from beside them. “Trifling with diction.”

Then it hit her: Wei Wuxian was teasing her. It was an allusion to a verse from the historical wartime poem, *Mianmian si yuandao*: “Unendingly do I long for my faraway husband.” She stomped her foot angrily.

“Who’s longing for you? Shameless!”

The group of girls fell into giggling laughter.

“Wei Wuxian, you’re so shameless!”

“I’ve never seen such a pest before!”

“Let me tell you, her name is…”

Mianmian pulled them away. “Go, go! None of you are allowed to tell him.”

As they left, Wei Wuxian called after their retreating backs, “It’s okay if you leave, but give me a perfume sachet! C’mon! Are you ignoring me? Not gonna give me one? If you won’t, then I’m gonna go ask someone else for your name! Someone will be willing to tell me…”

A perfume sachet came flying at him before he finished, hitting him squarely in the chest. With a yelp, Wei Wuxian pretended the projectile had pierced his very heart. Whirling the sachet around his finger by its ties, he walked back to Lan Wangji’s side, laughing as he did.

At the sight of Lan Wangji’s increasingly sullen expression, he asked, “What, why are you looking at me like that again? Where were we? Oh, yeah. How about I give you a piggyback ride?”

Lan Wangji regarded him quietly. “Do you behave so flippantly toward everyone?”

Wei Wuxian thought for a moment. “Seems that way?”

Lan Wangji lowered his eyes. It was a moment before he declared, “Irreverent!”

The word was spat through gritted teeth and tinged with an inexplicable bitterness. Lan Wangji sped up his pace and arduously walked onward, apparently unable to even spare Wei Wuxian an angry look. Seeing him straining himself again, Wei Wuxian hastily excused himself.

“Okay, okay, fine. You don’t have to run off. I’ll go, all right?”

True to his word, he went and caught up with Jiang Cheng in a few quick strides—but Jiang Cheng wasn’t pleasant to him either. He rebuked him savagely.

“You’re so frivolous!”

“You’re not Lan Zhan, why are you copying his commentary?” Wei Wuxian asked. “That scowl of his today is the worst it’s ever been. What’s going on with his leg?”

Jiang Cheng was surly. “You don’t have time to worry about him. Just mind yourself! Who knows what that idiot Wen Chao is up to, driving us up Mount Muxi to find some cave? I hope whatever he’s scheming doesn’t go down like that last fight against the tree yao, making us surround the thing like a meat shield.”

“Of course he looks upset,” a sect disciple next to them said in a hushed whisper. “The Cloud Recesses was set ablaze last month. You guys haven’t heard yet, I assume?”

Wei Wuxian was shocked. “Set ablaze?!”

Jiang Cheng had heard a lot of similar news over the past few days, so he wasn’t as surprised. “The Wens did it?”

“You could say that,” the sect disciple said. “Or you could also say… the Lans did it themselves. The eldest son of the Wen Clan, Wen Xu, went to Gusu and declared the Lan family head guilty of some crime—then forced the Lans to burn down their own residence! They said they were ‘allowing the family to put things in order and be reborn from the flames.’ Over half of the Cloud Recesses was reduced to ash, not to mention the surrounding forest. A centuries-old immortal realm, destroyed just like that… The Lan Clan family head was heavily injured too. We’re not even sure if he’s alive.”

The sect disciple trailed off with a sigh.

“Does that have anything to do with Lan Zhan’s leg?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Of course it does,” the sect disciple replied. “The first place Wen Xu ordered them to burn was the Library Pavilion. He said anyone who disobeyed would be taught a valuable lesson. But Lan Wangji refused to do it, so Wen Xu’s subordinates surrounded him and broke one of his legs. They didn’t even give him the chance to heal up before dragging him all the way out here. Who knows why they’re tormenting us like this!”

Wei Wuxian thought back carefully. Over the past few days, when he wasn’t enduring Wen Chao’s public verbal abuse, Lan Wangji had indeed rarely walked around. He was always either standing still or sitting down, and never spoke a word. It was only natural for someone who valued his composure so highly to hide his injury from others.

Jiang Cheng, noticing Wei Wuxian seemed to be drifting in Lan Wangji’s direction again, quickly yanked him to a stop. “What’s with you?! You still want to mess with him? You’re really asking for it!”

“I’m not going to mess with him,” Wei Wuxian said. “Look at his leg. The injury must’ve gotten worse after all the running around over the past few days. It’s only noticeable now because it’s gone past the point where he can hide it. If this keeps going, that leg is done for. I’m gonna go carry him.”

Jiang Cheng tightened his grip on Wei Wuxian. “You’re not even that close to him! Do you seriously not see how much he hates you? And carry him?! He probably doesn’t want you anywhere near him.”

“That’s okay. *I* don’t hate him,” Wei Wuxian declared. “I’ll snatch him up before he sees it coming. What’s he gonna do, choke me to death while I’ve got him on my back?”

“We can’t even take care of ourselves right now. We can’t afford to get involved in anyone else’s business,” Jiang Cheng warned. “It doesn’t concern us.”

“Firstly, it *does* concern us,” Wei Wuxian said. “Secondly, *someone* needs to worry!”

While the two were quietly arguing, one of the Wen servants came over to yell at them. “You two, don’t keep whispering to each other! Watch yourselves!”

Behind the servant was a beautiful, dainty girl. Her name was Wang Lingjiao, and she was one of Wen Chao’s personal attendants. No need to specify exactly *what* kind of “personal attendant”—everyone knew. She had been a handmaid in the service of Wen Chao’s wife, but thanks to her good looks, had climbed into her master’s bed after tossing him a few flirtatious glances. With this inadvertent aid from her mistress, the servant thus rose to a higher position. Her elevation also saw a new name rise among the cultivation clans: the Wang Clan of Yingchuan. Hardly a noteworthy name, and yet, thanks to its masters, one that could not be ignored.

Her spiritual power was too weak for her to wield a spiritual sword, so she instead carried a long, thin branding iron in her hand. Every Wen servant carried one of these irons. They could brand an excruciatingly painful mark on a victim’s body without needing to be heated first.

Wang Lingjiao brandished that rod imperiously as she scolded them. “Xiao-Wen-gongzi told the lot of you to search for the cave! What are you whispering about?”

Such was the current state of the world—they were taking orders from a smug, arrogant handmaid who had fumbled her way to the top by climbing a ladder made of her mistress’s bedsheets! The two of them didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Just then, someone shouted, “Found it!”

Wang Lingjiao immediately lost interest in the two of them and darted over to see. She cried out in happiness when she laid eyes on what had been discovered. “Wen-gongzi! We found it! We’ve found the entrance!”

It was a well-concealed underground cave, hidden at the foot of an old banyan tree wide enough for three grown men to encircle it with their arms. They hadn't found it sooner because the cave's entrance was very small, less than two square meters wide, and the tree's bulky roots and vines had formed a robust webbing that all but blocked the hole. There were also withered branches and fallen leaves layered on top, including a blanket of dirt and rocks. It was unusually well hidden.

Once the rotted branches and soil had been dug away and the roots chopped clear, the eerie, pitch-black interior yawned open before them.

The mouth of the cave led deep underground. Blasts of shiveringly cold air whirled from within, and when someone threw a rock in to test, there was not a sound—it was as if it had sunk into the sea.

Wen Chao was overjoyed. "This must be it! Go down, all of you! Quick!"

Jin Zixuan had really had enough of this. "You brought us here saying it was a Night Hunt for yao beasts," he spat tersely. "So might I ask what kind of yao beast this is, exactly? Inform us now, so we can respond to it properly and avoid the last hunt's chaos."

"Inform you now?" Wen Chao parroted, sounding offended. He straightened up and pointed at Jin Zixuan, then at himself. "How many times do you need me to tell you before you remember? Make no mistake. *You* are nothing more than my subordinate cultivators. *I* am the one giving commands. *I* don't need anyone else to suggest *I* do anything. Only *I* direct operations and mobilize troops. And only *I* can subdue and defeat yao beasts!"

He put particular emphasis on each repetition of "only I." His loud, cocky tone was at once loathsome and ridiculous.

"Did you not hear what Wen-gongzi said?" Wang Lingjiao scolded. "Go down now!"

Jin Zixuan stood at the very front of the group. Suppressing his anger, he flipped back the hem of his robes, caught a stout-looking vine, and hopped into the bottomless hole without a shred of hesitation. For once, Wei Wuxian could truly empathize with him. Whatever nefarious creatures might reside inside the cave, it would be far more pleasant to deal with them than Wen Chao and his coterie. If Jin Zixuan had to look at that pair of adulterers for even one more second, he really just might carry out his suicidal murder fantasies!

One by one, the rest of the group followed after Jin Zixuan and entered the underground cave. With their swords confiscated, the forcibly assembled team of disciples had no choice but to climb down slowly. The tree's vines grew along the dirt wall and were thick as an infant's wrist, making them quite sturdy. Wei Wuxian clung onto a vine and descended slowly, all the while mentally calculating just how deep the hole might be.

They slid for over a hundred meters before their feet touched solid ground.

Wen Chao called after them a few times from above. It was only after he was repeatedly assured it was safe that he mounted his sword and leisurely flew down, hugging Wang Lingjiao around her waist. The Wen disciples and servants landed shortly after him.

"Hopefully he's not hunting for anything too hard to handle," Jiang Cheng muttered under his breath. "I wonder if there are any other exits to this place… If whatever yao beast or other fiend is in here goes berserk, those vines are long enough that they might snap. It won't be easy to escape."

The others were all thinking the same thing. Worry seized their minds, and they unconsciously looked up at the bright opening of the cave. It looked very small from down here.

Wen Chao dismounted his sword and barked at them. "What are you all standing there for? Do you need me to teach you what to do? Go!"

The group of youths were thus driven into the depths of the cave. Since they were scouting ahead, Wen Chao deigned to have his servants give them a few torches. The domed ceiling of the underground cave was high and empty, untouched by the weak light. Wei Wuxian paid close attention to the way sound echoed around them; it seemed the deeper they went, the more cavernous the reverberations sounded. They were probably at least three hundred meters underground.

The scouts at the front were on high alert, their torches raised high. An unknown amount of time passed before they finally came upon a fathomless lake as vast as any that could be found above ground. The waters were dark and tranquil, and rocky islets of various sizes pockmarked the surface.

There was no other path leading out. But even though they were now at a dead end, their Night Hunt prey hadn't shown itself. They still didn't even know what it was. Heavy clouds of uncertainty loomed over everyone's heads, leaving them tense and on edge.

Irritated that the anticipated yao beast hadn't been found, Wen Chao swore a couple times. Then an idea hit him. "String someone up overhead. Lure the thing out by spilling their blood."

Most yao beasts had a ravenous lust for blood. The strong, bloody smell of human bait hanging limply overhead would definitely lure out their target.

Wang Lingjiao acknowledged his order and immediately pointed at a particular girl. "Her, then!"

It was the girl who had been giving out perfume sachets on the road—Mianmian. Her face went blank when she was named. The choice appeared to be offhanded, but Wang Lingjiao had been planning and waiting for such an opportunity for some time. The prominent clans had mostly sent boys, so there were very few young girls here. Wen Chao couldn't help but pay extra attention to them—and especially to Mianmian, who was pretty. She had already been forced to suffer the pinching and prodding of Wen Chao's slimy hands, powerless to do anything but swallow the humiliation. Wang Lingjiao had witnessed it all and loathed the sight.

The realization that she'd been chosen as bait really hit her, then. Mianmian snapped out of it and staggered backward with a terrified expression. When Wen Chao saw who Wang Lingjiao had picked, regret washed over him—he hadn't had the chance to truly taste her yet.

"That one? Why don't we choose someone else?"

"But *why*?" Wang Lingjiao whined, sounding aggrieved. "I want *this* one! Do you not want *her* to be picked?"

The moment she played the coquette, Wen Chao went weak and giddy with lurid excitement. He took another look at Mianmian's clothing—she was definitely not a proper clan junior but a sect disciple at most. She was more than suitable to be bait. Even if she died, no clan worthy of note would raise a fuss.

“What are you saying? What’s there to complain about? Jiaojiao gets to call the shots; she can do whatever her little self wants!”

Mianmian knew that once she was strung up, there was almost no chance she’d come back down alive. Panicked, she fled about the cave—but no matter where she tried to flee, the people there would scatter away. Wei Wuxian had barely moved a muscle but was immediately held down firmly by Jiang Cheng.

Suddenly, Mianmian noticed that there were two disciples who had not backed away from her but remained steadfastly still. She quickly ran to hide behind them, shaking in fear.

Those two disciples were Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji.

The Wen servants trying to seize Mianmian saw the two of them clearly didn’t intend to move. “Step aside!” they barked.

Lan Wangji’s only response was silence and indifference.

Noticing the situation turning sour, Wen Chao warned them, “What’re you two standing there for? Do you not understand human words? Or are you trying to save the damsel in distress?”

Jin Zixuan raised his eyebrows. “Are you done? Was it not enough to have others be your meat shields—now you want a living person to be your bloody bait?!”

Wei Wuxian was slightly shocked. *That Jin Zixuan actually has some guts…*

Wen Chao pointed at them accusingly. “Is this a revolt? I’m warning you; I’ve tolerated you for a long time! Take action immediately—truss that girl up! Otherwise, no one your clans sent along with you will be going home!”

Jin Zixuan sneered and didn’t move a muscle. Lan Wangji also acted as if he heard nothing, as tranquil as if he were in a meditative state.

However, there was a sect disciple from the Lan Clan of Gusu who had been trembling as he listened to Wen Chao’s threats. Unable to endure any longer, he charged over and seized Mianmian to bind her. Before he could succeed, Lan Wangji's brow furrowed sharply and he struck out with his palm. That single strike sent the boy hurtling away.

Although Lan Wangji did not speak a single word, the look he gave that sect disciple projected immense power in itself, and its meaning was more than obvious: *It is truly a disgrace that the Lan Clan of Gusu has a sect disciple such as you!* The sect disciple's shoulders were shaking as he slowly backed away, powerless to meet any of the eyes staring at him from all around.

Wei Wuxian whispered to Jiang Cheng, "Jeez. Lan Zhan's temper is gonna get him in trouble."

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists. There was probably no staying out of the situation at this point. It was delusional to hope that no blood would be shed!

Wen Chao flew into a rage. "This is mutiny! Kill them both!"

A number of Wen sect disciples drew their shining swords and charged at Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan. All the while, Core-Melting Hand Wen Zhuliu stood motionless behind Wen Chao with his hands clasped behind his back, as if he thought he didn't need to participate. Which was essentially true: the fight was few against many, and the two boys had no weapons. They were at a disadvantage in the first place and terribly exhausted by endless toil to boot. Furthermore, Lan Wangji was injured. They wouldn't last long.

Wen Chao's mood lifted as he watched his subordinates fight the pair. He clicked his tongue. "Who do they think they are, defying me? People like that deserve death."

"Yeah," a voice laughed cheekily. "Those who abuse their family's influence in order to oppress others and boldly commit crimes all deserve death. And not just death—beheading, with their heads put on display to be cursed at by millions, serving as a warning to future generations."

Upon hearing this, Wen Chao whirled around. "What did you say?!"

"Do you need me to repeat myself?" Wei Wuxian looked astonished. "All right then: Those who abuse their family's influence in order to oppress others and boldly commit crimes all deserve death. And not just death— beheading, with their heads put on display to be cursed at by millions, serving as a warning to future generations. Did you catch it this time?”

Wen Zhuliu shot Wei Wuxian a pensive look. Wen Chao, on the other hand, was simply outraged.

“What a load of crap! You dare utter such treasonous, arrogant nonsense?!”

Wei Wuxian’s lips curled upward, and he snorted before bursting into insolent laughter. Under the shocked and dumbfounded gaze of everyone around, he leaned on Jiang Cheng’s shoulder for support as he laughed so hard he couldn’t catch his breath.

“A load of crap? Treasonous? I think that describes you perfectly! Wen Chao, do you know who said those words? You must not, so lemme help you out: that was straight from the mouth of your clan’s founder, the *hugely* renowned cultivator Wen Mao. Denouncing your ancestor’s famous quote as a load of crap—I can’t believe it! Treasonous—what a roast. So good! Ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

That book that had been forced on them—*Quintessential Records and Quotable Characters of the Illustrious Wen*—treated even the most mundane small talk of the Wen family with bloated and ponderous importance, and dissected the deeper meaning of each word at length. Never mind memorizing the text well enough to recite from memory—just flipping through a couple of pages had left Wei Wuxian disgusted. But he’d found that particular quote from Wen Mao incredibly ironic, so he remembered it clearly.

Wen Chao’s face was awash in various colors as Wei Wuxian continued to speak.

“Oh, right. What was the exact sentence for the crime of insulting a famous Wen cultivator? What was the punishment, again? To be killed without mercy, I think? Mm, very good. You can go die now.”

Wen Chao couldn’t hold back any longer. He lunged, brandishing his sword—and in doing so, left the range of Wen Zhuliu’s protection.

Wen Zhuliu had only ever been on the defensive, guarding against others’ attacks on Wen Chao. He’d never expected Wen Chao to actually make a move on his own, and now that he had, the attack was too sudden for him to respond in time.

Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, had purposely incensed Wen Chao in order to make him lose control. The smile on his lips never faded as he snatched Wen Chao's sword with his lightning-quick hands. In one fell swoop, he countered the attack and restrained Wen Chao!

With Wen Chao in his grip, Wei Wuxian put some distance between himself and Wen Zhuliu by taking a hop, skip, and a jump to one of the lake's rock islets. He pressed the purloined sword against Wen Chao's neck and warned all present.

"Nobody move! Move and I'll spill some of your Wen-gongzi's blood!"

"Stop moving!" Wen Chao screeched heartbreakingly, as loud as he could. "All of you stop moving!"

Only then did the Wen disciples surrounding Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan stop their attacks.

"Core-Melting Hand, don't think about moving either!" Wei Wuxian barked. "You all know what a nasty temper your family head has. Your young master's at my mercy. He'd just need to bleed one drop of blood for everyone here to be as good as dead—and that includes you!"

Sure enough, Wen Zhuliu withdrew his hand. Seeing the situation was now under control, Wei Wuxian was about to say more—but suddenly, he felt the ground shaking.

"Jiang Cheng!" he cried in alarm. "Is it an earthquake?"

They were in an underground cave. If the earth began to quake and the mountain collapsed, the cave mouth might be blocked off, or they might be buried alive. Either scenario was horrifying to consider.

And yet Jiang Cheng shouted back, "No!"

Even so, Wei Wuxian felt the ground shaking harder. The jolts made the blade of the sword bump Wen Chao's throat several times, prompting his horrible shrieking.

"It's not the ground shaking!" Jiang Cheng yelled to him. "It's that thing under your feet!"

Wei Wuxian had noticed too. The tremors didn’t come from the ground but from the rock islet he had landed on. And not only was it shaking—it was rising higher and higher, more and more of it breaking through the surface of the water.

He finally realized that this wasn’t an islet. It was a massive creature that had been lurking submerged in the deep waters, and he was currently standing on its back!

The “rock islet” moved speedily toward the shore.

The approach of the unknown yao beast brought with it a formless dread. Only a handful of those present stood firm, among them Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Wen Zhuliu, and a few others. The rest reeled backward, scrambling away.

But just as they thought the thing under the water was about to erupt from the lake, it stopped. Wei Wuxian didn’t dare move carelessly, since jumping onto its back had roused the yao beast from its deep slumber. He held his ground, waiting quietly to see what would happen.

Several red maple leaves, unusually vivid in color, floated leisurely past them on the surface of the pitch-black waters surrounding the “rock islet.” Below those leaves, deep in the black depths, something gleamed like a pair of brass mirrors.

That pair of brass mirrors grew bigger and bigger, closer and closer. *Oh, no,* Wei Wuxian cried mentally and dragged Wen Chao back a couple of steps. There was a sudden tremor beneath his feet, and the “rock islet” rose high into the air. A humongous, swarthy head broke through the water’s leaf-speckled surface!

With screams of alarm both high and low echoing around it, the yao beast slowly twisted its neck and fixed its huge eyes on the two humans on its back. Its round head was very odd-looking—almost a turtle, nearly a snake. The head made it seem more like a python, but its body, which was now mostly out of the water, was more like that of a…

“…What a giant…tortoise…” Wei Wuxian gaped.

This was no ordinary tortoise.

If this tortoise had crashed into the drilling grounds of Lotus Pier, its shell alone could have filled the entire martial arts arena. Three strong men couldn't have encircled its dark head. Ordinary tortoises didn't have such incomparably long, serpentine necks that twisted like a jiao from its shell, nor a mouth that teemed with snaggled yellowing fangs. They also lacked four agile-looking feet tipped with sharp claws.

Wei Wuxian calmly met the gaze of that big pair of golden eyes. Their pupils contracted into thin slits, then flickered outward and thinned again, as if the beast was trying to focus and get a better look at what exactly was on its back. It seemed this yao beast had poor vision, like a snake—as long as they didn't move, it wouldn't be able to detect them.

Suddenly, two streams of wet air spewed from the dark, empty nostrils of the yao beast. The maple leaves that had been floating in the water just so happened to be stuck near its nose, and it was probably the tickling of those little leaves that had made it snort. Wei Wuxian remained still as a statue, but even this minor movement from the beast terrified Wen Chao. He knew the creature was bloodthirsty, so when it suddenly breathed out, he thought it was about to go berserk. No longer caring that a sword was right at his neck, he struggled like crazy and shrieked at Wen Zhuliu standing on the shore.

"Why aren't you coming to my rescue?! Come save me now! *What're you standing there for?!*"

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth and cursed. "Idiot!"

One of the two strange things before the yao beast's eyes suddenly started twisting like a worm and making ear-piercing noises. This instantly upset the creature, and its snake-like head snapped backward before springing forward again. It bared its snaggled yellow-black fangs and lunged at its own back!

Wei Wuxian hurled Wen Chao's sword. It shot like an arrow toward the beast's neck, aimed at the spot where a snake's heart should be. However, the head was armored in tough black scales. The blade impacted with a metallic clang, leaving a streak of sparks, as if it had hit a steel plate, before it finally dropped into the water.

The yao beast seemed taken aback, its gigantic eyeballs rolling downward to regard the long, slim object whose glow was still visible even as it sank deeper and deeper. Using this chance, Wei Wuxian grabbed Wen Chao and pushed off into the air, leaping to land on another rock islet.

This had better not be another giant tortoise! Wei Wuxian thought.

"Watch your back!" Wei Wuxian suddenly heard Jiang Cheng shout. "Core-Melting Hand is heading your way!"

Wei Wuxian whipped around and saw a large pair of hands coming silently at him. He reflexively struck out with a palm to counter Wen Zhuliu's attack but felt an unusually forceful, dismal energy wash over him, as if something was about to be sucked out of his arm. He instinctively withdrew his hand, and Wen Zhuliu used the opportunity to grab Wen Chao and retreat back to shore. Wei Wuxian cursed under his breath and quickly jumped ashore as well.

Every Wen Clan disciple had their bows drawn, and they aimed at the yao beast as they backed away. Arrows flew like rain, clinking and clanking as they struck the beast's black scales and shell. Sparks flew. While it looked like an intense battle, it was futile. Not a single arrow hit a vital point—all they managed to do was give the yao beast a good scratch. The massive head swung back and forth. Even setting aside the scales, its skin was like black rock, full of bumps and hollows. If an arrow did hit the skin, it couldn't penetrate far.

Wei Wuxian noticed that one of the Wen disciples next to him was gasping for breath as he nocked another arrow onto the bow. He pulled with all his might but still couldn't draw it fully. Unable to stand it any longer, Wei Wuxian wrested the bow from him and kicked the disciple aside. There were three arrows left in the quiver, and he nocked all three at once, pulling the bow to full draw as he aimed. The bowstring creaked at his ear, but just as he was about to release it, an alarmed cry suddenly came from behind him.

It was a truly panicked scream. When Wei Wuxian looked over, Wang Lingjiao was giving orders to three servants. Two of them wrestled Mianmian and held her head still for the third, who was aiming a branding iron at her face!

The tip of the iron rod was sizzling, already glowing red with heat. Wei Wuxian was some distance away, but the moment he saw this sight, he took action—changing his aim and releasing the bowstring. Three arrows shot out at once and hit their three targets, who collapsed backward without so much as a grunt.

The bowstring hadn't even stopped quivering when Wang Lingjiao suddenly snatched up the branding iron that had fallen to the ground. She lunged forward and grabbed Mianmian by the hair, aiming the rod at her face once more!

Wang Lingjiao's cultivation was extremely low, but her movements were swift and venomous. If she succeeded, even if Mianmian didn't lose an eye, her looks would be ruined for life. At a dire time like this, when their very lives were in peril, that woman was still obsessed with hurting people!

The other disciples were also nocking their arrows, completely focused on confronting the yao beast. There was no one else near the two girls, and Wei Wuxian was out of arrows, with no time to grab more. He rushed over and struck heavily at the hand with which Wang Lingjiao gripped Mianmian's hair, while simultaneously striking heavily at her heart.

The strike landed hard and hit home; blood gushed from Wang Lingjiao's mouth as she was sent flying backward. However, the tip of the branding iron had already been pressed to Wei Wuxian's chest.

He was assaulted by the stench of scorched cloth and flesh, and the horrifying smell of cooked meat. There was an excruciating pain near his heart, just below his collarbone. He gritted his teeth hard but couldn't hold back the snarl that escaped his throat from the agonizing pain.

He hadn't pulled his punches at all. His strike had sent Wang Lingjiao flying, spewing blood as she soared. She started wailing the moment she crashed into the ground. Jiang Cheng wound up and was about to chop Wang Lingjiao's head with his hand when Wen Chao started shrieking madly.

"Jiaojiao! *Jiaojiao!* Quick, save Jiaojiao!"

Wen Zhuliu's brow wrinkled, but he made no comment. He swiftly leapt over, fought Jiang Cheng off, and returned with Wang Lingjiao dangling from one hand. He tossed her at Wen Chao's feet. Wang Lingjiao threw herself into Wen Chao's arms, yowling at the top of her lungs and coughing blood all the while.

Jiang Cheng caught up with them and faced Wen Zhuliu. Wen Chao saw his frightening expression, both eyes bloodshot, and that all the other disciples were thrown into chaos. Not to mention the fact that the enormous yao beast had finally set its left front claw onto the lake's shore. Now, Wen Chao finally felt fear.

"Withdraw, withdraw!" he cried out. "Withdraw immediately!"

His subordinates had been struggling to hang on, not-so-patiently waiting for their great leader to call for retreat. As soon as they heard the command, they mounted their swords and flew off. Wen Chao's sword had been thrown into the water by Wei Wuxian, so he snatched one from another and hopped on with Wang Lingjiao in his arms. He immediately shot off with a *whoosh*, disappearing without a trace. The Wen servants and disciples followed closely after him.

"Stop the fight!" Jin Zixuan barked. "Let's go!"

The group of disciples had no desire to stick around and fight this rock mountain of a beast. They dashed like mad back to the cave's opening, but when they arrived, they saw the vine they had used to climb down was coiled on the ground like a dead snake.

Jin Zixuan flew into a rage. "Shameless damned crooks! They cut the vine!"

Without the vine, there was no way they could climb up this steep earthen wall. The opening was over a hundred meters above their heads, and the daylight that winked down at them blinded their eyes. The next moment, this light was extinguished by half, like a tiangou eating the moon.[1]

"They're blocking the hole!" someone exclaimed in alarm.

As soon as he said so, the remaining half of the light was snuffed out. Trapped deep underground, the only light that remained came from the burning torches that illuminated the lost, confused, and speechless young faces.

It was a good moment before Jin Zixuan's cursing shattered the dead silence. "Those cheaters really went and did it!"

"It's okay if we can't get out…" one of the boys mumbled. "My father and mother will come find me. When they hear of this, they'll definitely come search for us here…"

A scattered few agreed, but someone else immediately replied, voice trembling, "They still think we're being educated in Qishan. Why would they come look for us…? Besides, the Wens won't tell people the truth after they ran off. They'll definitely fabricate some excuse… We'll have no choice but to stay down here…"

"We can only stay in this underground cave…without food…in the company of a yao beast…"

At that moment, Jiang Cheng slowly walked over, supporting Wei Wuxian as he went. They just happened to catch the "without food" remark, and so Wei Wuxian had to add his commentary.

"Jiang Cheng, I got a chunk of cooked meat right here. You want it?"

"Screw off! Not even that branding iron could kill you," Jiang Cheng berated. "Is this really the time for your nonsense? You have no idea how badly I want to sew your mouth shut."

Lan Wangji's light-colored eyes fell on them. Then, his gaze moved to Mianmian. She was following Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, looking at a loss. Her face was scrunched up and stained with tears, and her hands twisted her skirt as she sniffled, sobbed, and repeatedly uttered apologies.

Wei Wuxian covered his ears and sighed. "Can you please stop crying? I'm the one that got burned, not you. Do you want me to comfort you? Why don't you comfort me instead, pretty please? All right, Jiang Cheng, that's enough of you hauling me around. It's not like I broke a leg."

The girls present all surrounded Mianmian and wept along with her. Withdrawing his gaze, Lan Wangji doubled back in the direction of the lake.

"Lan-er-gongzi, where are you going?" Jiang Cheng asked. "That yao beast is still guarding the lake."

"I am returning to the lake," Lan Wangji replied. "A way out lies there."

When the others heard there was a way to get out of here, the weeping abruptly stopped.

“A way out?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“There are maple leaves in the water,” Lan Wangji stated.

— Part 2 —

THAT SOUNDED LIKE A NON-SEQUITUR, but Wei Wuxian immediately understood.

There were maple leaves floating in the waters of the black lake where the yao beast was entrenched. But there were no maple trees inside or outside the cave, only banyan trees next to the cave's opening. There was also no trace of human activity. But the maple leaves in the water were fresh and vivid as fire—and when they were hiking up the mountain earlier, they had seen maple leaves carried by the current of a small stream.

It was clicking for Jiang Cheng as well. "There might be a tunnel at the bottom of the lake that's connected to an outside water source, which is how the maple leaves from the mountain streams get in."

Someone timidly spoke up, "But…how do we know if the tunnel is big enough for people to squeeze through? What if it's very small? What if it's only a crack?"

"And that yao beast is still guarding the lake." Jin Zixuan frowned. "And refusing to move."

Wei Wuxian tugged open his collar to fan nonstop at the injury under his clothes. "We have a sliver of hope, so let's act on it. It's better than sitting around waiting for Ma and Pa to come rescue us. So what if it's guarding the lake? Lure it out."

An hour later, after much discussion, the group of disciples went farther back into the cave once more. They hid and spied on the yao beast. Most of its massive body was still submerged in the black lake. Its long, snake-like neck emerged from its tortoise shell and approached the shore. It opened its mouth and carefully snagged the corpses with its fangs, then withdrew its neck to drag the bodies into the depths of its fortress-like shell. It seemed it preferred to take its meals indoors.

Wei Wuxian threw a torch. It smacked against a corner of the cave.

This movement was dramatically amplified in the dead silence of the underground. The head of the yao beast immediately jutted out of its shell once more. Its pupils were slitted, reflecting the dancing flames of the torches. It slowly extended its neck toward it, apparently instinctively drawn to objects that gave off light and heat.

Behind it, Jiang Cheng dove soundlessly into the water.

The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng lived by the waters, and their disciples were all exceptional swimmers. The few ripples produced by the action dispersed as soon as Jiang Cheng went under. The group stared intently at the surface of the water but glanced up at the yao beast every so often. The giant black snake head was hesitantly circling the torch, undecided about whether to approach. The sight made the youths increasingly nervous.

The yao beast finally decided to test what the torch was made of. It nudged its nose closer, which only resulted in it getting licked by searing flames. The creature immediately snapped its neck back and blew two furious streams of air from its nostrils, which extinguished the torch.

Right at that moment, Jiang Cheng resurfaced from the water and drew in a deep breath. The yao beast sensed the intrusion on its territory and swiveled its head, then twisted its body back toward Jiang Cheng.

Seeing things going awry, Wei Wuxian bit down on his finger, then swiftly drew a few sloppy characters on the center of his palm. He rushed out of the tunnel and slapped the ground. The moment his palm left the earth, a column of flames taller than a man surged from the ground!

Startled, the yao beast gazed in his direction and Jiang Cheng took the chance to swim ashore.

“There’s a tunnel at the bottom of the lake! It’s not small!” he said.

“How small is not small?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Five or six people can get through at once!” Jiang Cheng exclaimed.

“Everyone, listen here!” Wei Wuxian shouted to the crowd. “Follow right behind Jiang Cheng! Into the water and into the tunnel! Everyone who’s still in good shape, take care of the injured. Those who can swim, take care of those who can’t. Five or six can go through at a time, so don’t get pushy! Now, go!”

As he spoke, the flame column gradually died out. Wei Wuxian retreated a dozen steps back in a different direction, then struck the ground again to erupt another column of fire. The giant golden eyes of the yao beast glowed red from the flames' reflection and burned with madness as it flexed its claws. It dragged its mountainous body in Wei Wuxian's direction.

"What're you doing?!" Jiang Cheng shouted angrily.

"What're *you* doing?!" Wei Wuxian snapped back. "Take them and go!"

He had successfully lured the yao beast onto shore—when should they go, if not now?! Jiang Cheng clenched his teeth.

"Everyone come over here!" Jiang Cheng ordered. "Those who can swim stand on the left. Those who can't on the right!"

Wei Wuxian was observing the terrain as he fled around, setting off flames. Suddenly, a sharp pain stabbed through his arm. He looked down to see he had been shot by an arrow.

As it turned out, the Lan sect disciple whom Lan Wangji had glared at earlier had found a bow and arrow abandoned by the Wens and tried to shoot at the yao beast. Perhaps because of the beast's fearsome savagery and agility, the boy's hands were panicked and unsteady, and the shot had flown astray and pierced Wei Wuxian instead.

Wei Wuxian had no time to pull it out. He struck the ground again, calling forth another surge of flames.

"Back off! Don't make more work for me!"

The sect disciple had wanted to fell the yao beast with a single shot to its vital spot, in hopes of regaining some of the face he'd lost earlier. Who could've thought it would turn out like this? His face flushed progressively paler as he fled into the water.

Jiang Cheng urged Wei Wuxian, "Get over here, hurry!"

"Be right there!" Wei Wuxian said.

Jiang Cheng still had three disciples with him who couldn't swim, but they were the last group left. They couldn't delay any longer—they had to dive *now*.

Wei Wuxian tore the arrow out of his arm before it abruptly hit him. *Oh no!*

The resulting smell of blood greatly excited the yao beast. Its neck suddenly grew in length, and its mouth gaped wide with fangs!

Before Wei Wuxian could think of what to do, he was shoved by someone and sent tumbling. Lan Wangji had pushed him away.

The jaws of the yao beast closed in one smooth motion on Lan Wangji's right leg. Just watching this happen, Wei Wuxian felt pain spark in his own leg, but Lan Wangji was, shockingly, *still* expressionless. All he did was slightly wrinkle his brow.

But the yao beast immediately started dragging him backward!

Judging by the creature's size and the crushing power of its fangs, it could bite a person in half like it was nothing at all. Thankfully, it didn't seem to like eating things that were broken into chunks. Once it had caught its prey, it was quite adamant in dragging it back into its shell to savor at its leisure.

But if it only bit down a little harder, Lan Wangji's leg would snap right off. Its tortoise shell was incomparably tough. No weapon could penetrate it. Once it took Lan Wangji in there, he could forget about coming back out!

Wei Wuxian broke into a mad dash and lunged before the beast's head fully shrank back into the shell, managing to catch one of the fangs in its upper jaw. Ordinarily, he wasn't anywhere near strong enough to grapple with a monster like this, but with a life on the line, a horrifying and inhuman power surged through him. Pushing against the tortoise shell with both feet, he gripped that tooth firmly and wedged himself there like a stopper, not allowing it to shrink back, denying it the chance to enjoy its delicious meal.

Lan Wangji, who had never imagined Wei Wuxian could catch up in such circumstances, was entirely dumbfounded.

Wei Wuxian feared that if the yao beast threw a fit, it'd either eat them both alive or tear Lan Wangji's leg off. He continued to grip the sharp upper tooth with his right hand, while his left seized at a tooth in the beast's lower jaw. He then forced his arms in opposite directions with all his might. Veins bulged on his forehead, practically bursting on his bright red face.

Gradually, the two rows of fangs clamped onto Lan Wangji's flesh were forced apart!

With the creature's fangs no longer able to hold its prey in place, Lan Wangji dropped into the lake. Wei Wuxian's god-like strength abruptly vanished at the sight. He released his grip, unable to hold on, and the two rows of crooked fangs snapped violently together with a sound as deafening as the hardest of stones colliding.

Wei Wuxian fell into the water next to Lan Wangji. He flipped around, scooped Lan Wangji close, and then hauled them both out of harm's way with one arm, swimming meters in a flash and leaving a long, beautiful wave behind them. Tumbling onto shore, he hauled Lan Wangji onto his back and bolted.

"You?!" Lan Wangji blurted out.

"Me!" Wei Wuxian confirmed. "Surprise!"

"What surprise?!" Sprawled on Wei Wuxian's back, Lan Wangji had a rare and obvious disturbance in his tone. "Let me down!"

Wei Wuxian's mouth didn't take a break but kept pace even as they ran for their lives. "Wouldn't I look bad if I let you down just because you asked?"

The roar of the yao beast behind them reverberated painfully in their ears and chests, and they felt blood surging up their throats. Wei Wuxian finally shut up and concentrated on escape. To prevent the yao beast from rampaging after them, he scurried through narrow holes and chose paths its tortoise shell couldn't squeeze into. He lost track of time as he ran, holding his breath, and didn't slow his pace until he could no longer hear the creature.

Wei Wuxian relaxed and let himself slow. He smelled blood. When he reached back, his right hand returned wet with it.

*Oh no,*Wei Wuxian thought, *Lan Zhan's injury is going to get even worse.*

Figuring he'd run far enough that they'd made it somewhere safe, he hurriedly turned around and set Lan Wangji gently on the ground.

Lan Wangji's leg had already been injured when it was mauled by the yao beast and then soaked in water. Large patches of blood stained his white robes crimson, and there were rows of visible puncture holes from the fangs. He was unsteady, barely able to stand. The moment Wei Wuxian let go of him, he tumbled onto his backside.

Wei Wuxian leaned down and checked him over for a moment before straightening up to search the underground cave. There were a few shrubs around, and with difficulty, he found some thick and straight branches. He used a corner of his clothing to scrub the dirt off them and then squatted in front of Lan Wangji.

"You got any rope or string on you? Oh, your forehead ribbon looks like it'll do the trick. Come, come, take it off."

Wei Wuxian didn't wait for Lan Wangji to respond before he swiftly reached out and plucked said ribbon free. He flicked it out once, then straightened Lan Wangji's disaster-prone leg before firmly splinting the limb to the branches, using the ribbon like a bandage to tie everything in place.

So suddenly stripped of his forehead ribbon by Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji's eyes widened.

"You…!"

Wei Wuxian's nimble hands had already tied the knot. He patted Lan Wangji's shoulder to console him.

"What about me? Let's not fuss about it at a time like this. As much as you like that ribbon, it's not as important as your leg, right?"

Lan Wangji fell backward. Whether he lacked the strength to sit upright or had been simply angered into speechlessness remained to be seen.

Wei Wuxian suddenly caught a faint whiff of medicinal herbs. He fumbled a small perfumed sachet out of his own robes. It was dripping wet, its tassels drooping, an exquisite yet pitiable sight. He recalled Mianmian saying it was filled with medicinal herbs and immediately opened it to check. Sure enough, it was packed with half-dried, partially-crushed pieces of medicinal herbs, along with a few tiny flowers.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan,” he urged. “Stop napping, get up for a minute. I’ve a perfume sachet here, come and see if there are any medicinal herbs we can use.”

Wei Wuxian yanked and pulled at Lan Wangji, doggedly pestering him until he gave in and feebly sat up. Lan Wangji gave the contents a look. To his surprise, he recognized several herbs effective for stopping bleeding and purging poison.

As he picked them out, Wei Wuxian commented, “I didn’t expect that girlie’s perfume sachet to come in so handy. I’ll have to thank her big time when we get back.”

“You mean, *harass* her big time?” Lan Wangji responded coldly.

“What are you saying?” Wei Wuxian *tsk*-ed. “It’s not harassment when *I* do it. It’s only harassment when it comes from someone greasy, like Wen Chao. Anyhow, strip off your clothes.”

Lan Wangji furrowed his brows slightly. “What?”

“What, what? Strip!” Wei Wuxian repeated.

When he said strip, he meant strip; Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji’s collar with both hands and yanked it open, peeling it off to expose his snow-white chest and shoulders. Suddenly pinned to the ground and forcibly stripped of his clothes, Lan Wangji promptly turned green.

“Wei Ying! What are you trying to do?!”

Wei Wuxian completely divested Lan Wangji of his clothing and ripped the fabric into strips. “What am I trying to do? There’s only the two of us here now. Take a good, hard look; what do you *think* I’m trying to do?”

With that, he stood up and tugged his belt open, revealing his own chest as if to reciprocate. His collarbones were deep, with smooth contours. Although still an adolescent, he brimmed with vitality and strength.

Watching him, Lan Wangji’s face cycled through a myriad of colors, from sickly pale to darkly flushed. He looked almost like he was about to cough up blood. Wei Wuxian smiled and took a step closer, cornering him.

He removed his own dripping wet outer robe before Lan Wangji’s eyes, then lifted it with one hand before releasing his grip. The clothes dropped wetly to the ground.

Wei Wuxian opened his arms in a shrug. “Now that we’re done with the robes, it’s time for the pants.”

Lan Wangji wanted to stand up. But his leg was injured, they’d just fought a fierce battle, and the fury boiling in his skull addled his mind. The higher his anxiety peaked, the less he was able to stand. He was completely and utterly exhausted. With such agitation rattling his body, he coughed up a mouthful of blood.

At this sight, Wei Wuxian immediately crouched down and tapped several acupoints on Lan Wangji’s chest.

“There, now all that bad blood is out. You’re welcome!”

Having coughed up the purple-black blood, Lan Wangji immediately felt the nauseating, suffocating pain in his chest recede. When he reflected on Wei Wuxian’s actions, it finally dawned on him. After entering Mount Muxi, Wei Wuxian had realized that Lan Wangji didn’t look well. There must have been pent-up qi in his chest—and so Wei Wuxian had deliberately terrorized him, riling him into coughing up the blood he’d been holding back.

Although Lan Wangji knew he’d acted with good intentions, he still seemed a bit peeved. “…Can you not play such pranks again?!”

“Bottling up things like that in your heart is bad for your health,” Wei Wuxian argued back. “But they’re easily expelled with a scare. Don’t worry, I’m not into guys. I won’t take this chance to try anything with you.”

“Frivolous!” Lan Wangji exclaimed.

Wei Wuxian, who had noticed long ago that Lan Wangji had quite the temper today, didn’t bother to argue further. “Fine, fine. So be it.” He waved dismissively. “I’m frivolous. I’m the most frivolous of all.”

As he spoke, chilly underground air crept up along his spine, giving him a fit of shivers. He quickly rose to his feet and went around collecting withered twigs and dead leaves, then redrew a fire spell on his palm.

The pile of withered branches crackled alight, occasionally sparking off embers. Wei Wuxian crushed up the medicinal herbs he'd picked out earlier, and then ripped open the leg of Lan Wangji's trousers to sprinkle the herbs evenly over the three hideous, barely clotted black holes.

Suddenly, Lan Wangji reached out and stopped Wei Wuxian mid-action.

"What's wrong?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Without a word, Lan Wangji took a portion of the crushed herbs from Wei Wuxian's palm and pressed them on Wei Wuxian's chest.

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian cried out. His body shook and trembled at the sudden pressure. He'd completely forgotten that he also had a fresh wound—the burn from the branding iron. It was still bleeding and had also been soaked in water.

Lan Wangji withdrew his hand. Wei Wuxian picked off the bits of herbs from the wound, hissing a few times as he did, and then threw them back onto Lan Wangji's leg.

"Don't worry about it. I get hurt all the time, but that doesn't stop me from playing in the lotus-lake water right after. I'm used to it. A tiny perfume sachet like this can't hold much. There's not enough herbs to go around, and the way I see it, those three holes of yours need them more… *Ah!*"

Lan Wangji's face was grim. Moments later, he said, "Since you know such pain, do not act so recklessly next time."

"I didn't have a choice, did I?" Wei Wuxian responded. "You think I *wanted* to get scorched? Who knew Wang Lingjiao was so vicious? She almost got that iron in Mianmian's eye. Mianmian's a girl, and a pretty one to boot—how terrible would it be if she was blind in one eye or branded with a mark like that for life?"

"That mark is on *your* body for life," Lan Wangji said in a thin voice.

"That's different. It's not like it's on my face," Wei Wuxian explained. "Besides, I'm a man. What's there to be afraid of? What man doesn't get hurt and earn a few scars in his life?"

Still bare-chested, he squatted on the ground and picked up a branch to poke at the fire to stoke it.

“Besides, if you look at it from another perspective… Even though this mark is here to stay, it represents the fact that I once protected a girl. And that girl will definitely remember me now. She’ll never forget me for the rest of her life. Now that I think about it, it’s actually quite…”

Lan Wangji shoved him hard, suddenly furious. “So you *are* aware that she will never forget you for the rest of her life!”

His shove happened to land smack dab on Wei Wuxian’s chest wound. Clutching his heart, Wei Wuxian shouted as he fell back on his buttocks.

“…Lan Zhan!” The pain was so intense it made him break out in a cold sweat. Groaning, he craned his neck up. “…Lan Zhan, you…what Great Grudge[2] do you have against me?! …You’re treating me like I killed your father!”

Lan Wangji clenched his fists. A moment later, he relaxed, looking like he wanted to help Wei Wuxian up. But Wei Wuxian sat up by himself and shrank back, dodging him repeatedly.

“Okay, okay! I know you don’t like me, so I’ll sit further away. Don’t come over! And don’t push me again—it hurts like hell.”

The wound was on his left side, and it hurt when he lifted that arm. Wei Wuxian scurried away and collected the white robe that he’d torn into strips earlier, then tossed the strips to Lan Wangji from afar with his right hand.

“Bandage yourself. I’m gonna stay here.”

He hung the outer robe he’d taken off by the fire to dry. Neither of them spoke for a long time as their clothes dried. It was, of course, Wei Wuxian who opened the lines of communication again.

“Lan Zhan, you’re so weird today. So rough. You’re not speaking like you normally do either.”

“Do not flirt with others when you have no deeper intent,” Lan Wangji stated. “You do as you please and throw their hearts into turmoil!”

“It’s not like *you’re* the one I’m flirting with,” Wei Wuxian said. “You’re the last person I’d expect to be thrown into turmoil. Unless…”

“Unless what?” Lan Wangji snapped.

“Unless, Lan Zhan…you like Mianmian!”

“The barbarian speaks of the eight paths,”[3] Lan Wangji said coldly after a brief pause.

Well, I’ll ramble on about nine, then,” Wei Wuxian quipped.

“Is making snappy comebacks fun?” Lan Wangji questioned.

“Very. And I’m not just fast with my mouth, I’ve got slick moves too.”

Lan Wangji muttered to himself, “…Why am I here talking nonsense with you…?”

Without Lan Wangji realizing it, Wei Wuxian had scooted over to sit beside him again, heedless of any consequences of his chatter.

“Because it can’t be helped. We’re the only two unfortunate souls left in this place, right? If not me, who else are you gonna talk nonsense with?”

Lan Wangji shot a look at Wei Wuxian—someone who never learned his lesson, someone who forgot all about pain once the wound had healed. Wei Wuxian was about to give him a cheeky grin when he suddenly saw Lan Wangji lower his head.

Wei Wuxian let out a horrible scream. “*Ahhhhhhh!* Stop! Stop stop *stop*!”

Lan Wangji had buried his face deep in the crook of Wei Wuxian’s arm and latched on with his teeth. Not only did he *not* stop when Wei Wuxian started screaming—he bit down even harder.

“Are you letting go or not?!” Wei Wuxian shrieked. “I’m gonna kick you! Don’t think I won’t kick you just because you’re injured!

“Stop it! Stop biting! I’ll get lost! I’ll beat it! I’ll go I’ll go *I’ll go just let go and I’ll get lost!*

“Lan Zhan, you’ve gone mad today! You’re a dog! *A dog! Stop biting me!!*”

Once Lan Wangji was finally done losing his mind and had had his fill of biting, Wei Wuxian sprang to his feet and scrambled over to the other side of the underground cave.

“Don’t you follow me!”

Lan Wangji slowly straightened up and rose to his feet. He fixed his clothes and hair. His eyes were downcast, and he said nothing, looking as calm as could be—like the person who’d just been scolding, shoving, and biting was someone else entirely.

Wei Wuxian stared at the teeth marks on his arm. Still badly shaken, he crouched down and shrank back into a corner, where he continued to poke at the firewood. He couldn’t make heads or tails of what was happening. *What is* up *with Lan Zhan? He might’ve saved me, but I technically saved him too, right? Not that I need him to thank me or anything, but why can’t we be friends even when things are like this? Or am I…really as annoying as Jiang Cheng said?!*

He was still doubting himself when Lan Wangji suddenly spoke. “Thank you.”

Thinking he’d misheard, Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji was looking at him as well. “Thank you,” he repeated solemnly.

Seeing him slightly lower his head, Wei Wuxian feared he was going to do a full bow of gratitude. He hurriedly moved aside.

“Let’s drop the formalities. I have this problem where I absolutely *can’t stand* to hear others thanking me. Especially people like you, who do it all formally like that. It gives me the creeps, I’m getting goosebumps. Don’t even bother with the bow.”

“You are overthinking it,” Lan Wangji coolly replied. “Even if I wish to bow to you, I cannot move.”

It seemed he’d returned to normal. He’d even thanked him twice. Wei Wuxian, in his delight, unconsciously wanted to scoot over again. He loved to get up close and personal with people, nuzzling and rubbing on them, but the slight stab of pain from the teeth marks on his arm reminded him that

Lan Zhan had lost his mind earlier and there just might be a repeat performance. So he quickly restrained himself.

He stared at the dark ceiling of the cave and mused aloud with a serious expression,

“Jiang Cheng and the others got out. Getting down the mountain takes a day or two, and once they reach its base, they’ll definitely return to their own homes rather than reporting back to the Wens. But their swords have been confiscated, so who knows how long it’ll take for them to find help… Seems to me we’ll be underground for some time. We’ll have to figure out a way to solve some lingering issues.”

He paused briefly before continuing, “The good news is the monster keeps to that black lake and doesn’t chase after us. But that’s also *bad* news. If it keeps hogging the lake, we can’t get through that tunnel at the bottom.”

“Perhaps it is not a monster,” Lan Wangji said. “Consider. What does it resemble?”

“A tortoise!”

“There is a divine creature with such a form.”

“The divine beast Xuanwu?”

Xuanwu, also known as Xuanming, was a chimeric tortoise-snake. As a water deity, it dwelled in the North Sea. The underworld also lay in the north, and for that reason, it was the deity of the north.

Lan Wangji nodded, and Wei Wuxian flashed his teeth to demonstrate.

“That thing in there has a mouthful of fangs like thiiiiiiis. It even dines on human flesh. Isn’t that far too different from the myths?”

“It is not a true divine beast, naturally,” Lan Wangji stated. “Instead, it is a creature that failed to achieve divinity and devolved into a yao. In other words, it is a malformed divine beast.”

“Malformed?” Wei Wuxian parroted.

“I have read records of it in ancient texts,” Lan Wangji began to explain. “Four centuries ago, a ‘false Xuanwu’ appeared in Qishan and went on a rampage. It was massive and hungered for the flesh of living humans. A cultivator deemed it the ‘Xuanwu of Slaughter.’”

“So Wen Chao brought us here to hunt this four hundred-year-old Xuanwu of Slaughter?” Wei Wuxian wondered.

“It is more massive than recorded in the ancient texts, but it must be.”

“It’s been four hundred years, so it probably grew a little. Was the Xuanwu of Slaughter not slain back then?”

“No,” Lan Wangji replied. “A group of cultivators formed an alliance in preparation to slay it. That winter, there was heavy snowfall and the cold was uncommonly bitter. The Xuanwu of Slaughter vanished and has not appeared since.”

“It went into hibernation.” Wei Wuxian paused briefly. “But even then, it didn’t need to sleep for four hundred years, right? You said the thing loved eating humans. How many did it devour?”

“As recorded in the books, each time it appeared it would consume anywhere between a few hundred people to entire cities and villages,” Lan Wangji answered. “Over the course of its rampaging, more than five thousand were devoured in total.”

“Oh, so it just stuffed itself and went into a food coma,” Wei Wuxian concluded.

The yao beast seemed to enjoy dragging corpses back into its shell, though it was hard to tell whether it was stockpiling food or just wanted to savor them slowly. Perhaps it had amassed too much food in its shell all at once four centuries ago and had yet to digest all of it.

Lan Wangji ignored him, but Wei Wuxian continued. “Speaking of food, have you done inedia before? Cultivators like us can go around three or four days without eating or drinking, but if no one comes to our rescue in a few days, we’ll start getting weaker—it’ll drain our physical strength, energy, and spiritual power.”

If Wen Chao and his people stood by and did nothing after their escape, it wouldn’t be all that bad. The other families might bring reinforcements in a few days’ time. The real danger was the Wens refusing to provide timely aid—or worse, hitting them when they were down. The “other families” who might come to their rescue were really only the Lan Clan of Gusu and the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. And if the Wens decided to obstruct them, then those “few days” would likely double.

Wei Wuxian retrieved a branch and sketched a rough map on the ground, then connected a few lines on it.

“Mount Muxi is a little closer to Gusu than it is to Yunmeng, so your family should arrive first. Let’s just wait. Even if they don’t come, Jiang Cheng should be able to get to Lotus Pier in a couple of days at most. He’s a smart cookie. The Wens won’t be able to stop him. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Lan Wangji lowered his eyes and spoke softly, looking wan. “They will not come.”

“Hmm?”

“The Cloud Recesses has been burned to the ground.”

“…But everyone’s still alive, right?” Wei Wuxian tentatively asked. “Your uncle? Your brother?”

Even if the head of the Lan family—Lan Wangji’s father, Qingheng-jun—was severely injured, Wei Wuxian had assumed they still had Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen to hold down the fort.

However, Lan Wangji answered woodenly, “Father is nearly gone, and xiongzhang is missing.”

The branch Wei Wuxian was using to scribble on the ground stalled mid-action.

That other disciple had mentioned the head of the Lan Clan was severely injured while they were heading up the mountain, but Wei Wuxian had never expected it to be so serious that he was “nearly gone.” Maybe Lan Wangji had only just received the news that his father was dying. Although the head of the Lan Clan cultivated in seclusion year-round and paid no heed to outside affairs, he was still Lan Wangji’s father. And on top of that, Lan Xichen was missing too. No wonder Lan Wangji was particularly gloomy and hot-tempered.

All at once, Wei Wuxian felt a little awkward, not knowing what comfort he could offer.

When he absentmindedly turned his head to glance over, his entire body froze.

The firelight reflecting off Lan Wangji’s face made his skin look like warm jade. It also clearly illuminated the single streak of tears on his cheek.

Wei Wuxian was shocked dumb for a second, then thought, *Oh crap!*

People like Lan Wangji probably only shed tears a few times over the course of their lives. And Wei Wuxian just had to be here for one of those times. He couldn’t bear to see anyone cry. If he came upon a woman crying, he felt compelled to comfort and tease her until she broke into a smile. A man’s tears made him even more uncomfortable. In Wei Wuxian’s opinion, stumbling upon a usually-strong man in the act of crying was far more terrifying than stumbling upon a chaste girl in the middle of a bath. And he couldn’t even go over and comfort him.

Lan Wangji had suffered so many blows—his home burned to ash, his entire clan persecuted, his father on death’s door, his elder brother missing, and Lan Wangji himself being wounded. Any attempts at comfort would be useless.

Wei Wuxian didn’t know what to do with himself, so he turned his head away. After a while, he tried to speak. “Um, Lan Zhan.”

“Shut up,” Lan Wangji snapped frostily.

Wei Wuxian shut up.

The firewood crackled.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said quietly. “You really are such a loathsome person.”

“Oh…” Wei Wuxian said.

With so much going on, Lan Zhan must be stressed as hell. And yet here I am, prancing around in front of him. No wonder he’s so angry. Drained of his strength and with that injured leg, he couldn’t hit me, so he bit me instead… I think I’d best give him some space. Some peace and quiet…

After holding himself back for a while, he went ahead and said, “Not trying to annoy you…but are you cold? The clothes are dry now. You can have the inner robe, and I’ll keep the outer one.”

The inner robe was his undergarment, which wouldn’t normally have been appropriate for Lan Wangji to wear, but his outer robe was filthy. The Lan Clan of Gusu were obsessed with cleanliness, and it seemed even more offensive to give such a garment to Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji didn’t respond, nor did he look at him. Wei Wuxian tossed the dry white inner robe to him and draped the outer robe around himself before silently making himself scarce to give Lan Wangji space.

They waited for three days.

There was neither day nor night in the cave. The only reason they knew it was three days was because of that infuriating Lan internal clock, allowing one to mark the time by their sleeping and waking. One only had to count how many times Lan Wangji slept to determine the passing hours.

Having been finally allowed three days of rest to conserve energy and strength, the wound on Lan Wangji’s leg was slowly healing, not worsening. With this improvement, he was able to move himself into a lotus position to meditate and cultivate in silence.

Wei Wuxian made himself scarce over those three days. It was only when Lan Wangji regained his calm and remastered his emotions—turning back into the unflappable, expressionless Lan Zhan he knew—that he began to act like nothing had happened. He shamelessly pretended not to have seen or heard anything that night and no longer teased him for his own amusement, knowing not to go too far. Their interactions were lukewarm but peaceful.

They both scouted around the black lake a number of times. By now, the Xuanwu of Slaughter was done grabbing all the corpses with its mouth and stashing them one by one in its shell. The colossal, pitch-black shell floated on the water’s surface like a giant, indestructible warship. The first few times they ventured near, they heard the sound of loud chewing coming from within. Later, the noise vanished and was replaced by what seemed to be thunderous snores.

The two initially wondered whether it was feasible to sneak underwater to search for the tunnel through which they could escape while the yao beast was asleep, but they could only search for an incense time at most before the beast detected their movements. Although they made a few attempts, they never found the tunnel Jiang Cheng mentioned. Wei Wuxian suspected it might now be blocked by the yao beast. He tried to lure it out of the water again, but the monster seemed to have grown tired of all the commotion and didn’t stir.

They collected the arrows, the longbows, and the branding irons scattered all over the banks and carried them back to count. There were over a hundred arrows, more than thirty longbows, and a dozen branding irons.

By then, it was already the fourth day.

Lan Wangji picked up a longbow and examined its material with rapt attention. He plucked at the bowstring, unleashing a powerful, resounding metallic sound.

This was a variety of bow and arrow used by cultivation clans to hunt nefarious creatures, and the materials used to forge them were of extraordinary quality. Lan Wangji removed the bowstrings from all the bows and tied them together. He used both hands to stretch this single, long bowstring taut and whipped it through the air. The bowstring shot out like lightning and a flash of bright light streaked forth. A rock ten meters away shattered into pieces.

Lan Wangji retracted the bowstring, and it whistled sharply as it cut through the air.

“The Killing Chord?” Wei Wuxian asked.

The Killing Chord was a secret technique belonging to the Lan Clan of Gusu, created and passed down by Lan Yi—the third-generation family head and granddaughter of the clan’s founding father, Lan An. Lan Yi was also the only female family head of the Lan Clan of Gusu. She cultivated with the guqin, which had seven strings that could be instantly disassembled and joined together. The seven strings, arranged from thickest to thinnest, could play immaculate melodies under her soft snow-white fingers one moment and transform into a lethal weapon the next, slicing through bones and flesh like mud.

Lan Yi originally created this skill to assassinate dissidents, which earned her quite a bit of criticism. The Lan Clan of Gusu was itself ambivalent about the technique. But it was undeniable that the Killing Chord was the most destructive of their secret techniques, and one that was suited for use in both long-range and close combat.

“Breach from within,” Lan Wangji stated.

With a shell as solid as a fortress and incomparably tough skin, the yao beast seemed impenetrable. But with such outer defenses, there was a high chance that the parts of its body hidden within its shell were vulnerable. The same thought had crossed Wei Wuxian’s mind over the past few days, so he knew exactly what Lan Wangji was talking about.

What he was even clearer about was their present situation. After three days of recuperation, their strength was now at its peak. But if they were to wait any longer, this optimal state would begin to deteriorate.

Furthermore, the fourth day had passed, and rescue still had not come.

Rather than resign themselves to their fates and wait for death, they might as well fight with all they had. If both of them could join forces and slay this Xuanwu of Slaughter, they could escape through the tunnel at the bottom of the black lake.

“I concur. Breach from within,” Wei Wuxian said. “But I’ve heard about your family’s Killing Chord. The shell’s interior is a confined space. Not a venue conducive to using that skill to its full effect. Plus, the wound on your leg still hasn’t healed. Won’t it be hard to make this work?”

This was the truth, and Lan Wangji understood. They both knew that forcing themselves to do what they were incapable of doing would only drag the other down.

“Follow my lead,” Wei Wuxian said.

A little less than half the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s shell was still floating above the surface of the black lake. Its four limbs, its head, and its tail had all shrunk back into the shell. There was a large hole in front, and five small holes on its left, right, and back. It looked like an isolated islet, a small mountain, its body pitch-black and uneven, covered with moss and long, hanging strands of dark algae.

Carrying a bundle of arrows and branding irons on his back, Wei Wuxian soundlessly dove into the water like a slender minnow, swimming to the front of the shell where the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s head would be. Almost half the opening was submerged in the waters of the black lake, so Wei Wuxian followed the current and swam inside. After passing through, he hopped into the shell’s interior and set both feet on solid “ground.” It felt like he had stepped onto thick, rotten, water-logged mud. The acrid smell was so overwhelming it almost forced a curse from his mouth.

The foul stench was rancid and cloyingly fishy. It reminded Wei Wuxian of a fat dead rat he’d once seen by a lake in Yunmeng. Pinching his nose, he thought, *What an awful place… Thank goodness I didn’t let Lan Zhan come in here. He would’ve puked on the spot at this stench, with that sheltered life of his. And even if he didn’t puke, he would have fainted for sure.*

The Xuanwu of Slaughter snored softly. Wei Wuxian held his breath as he walked soundlessly, the soles of his boots sinking deeper and deeper. Three steps later, the sludge had already risen above his knees. There seemed to be some hard lumps in the swamp. Wei Wuxian stooped a little, groped around, and unexpectedly touched something hairy.

It felt like human hair.

He withdrew his hand. That was surely one of the people the Xuanwu of Slaughter had dragged in. He felt around some more and found a boot with half a leg inside, rotted to the point it was half flesh and half bone.

This yao beast clearly wasn’t a big fan of cleanliness. Any leftovers or parts it didn’t care to finish would fall through the gaps between its teeth and rot inside the shell. Over the centuries, it had all congealed into a thick sludge. Wei Wuxian was standing in a mire of death made of broken corpse limbs.

Having crawled, fumbled, and tumbled all around over the past few days, he was already unbearably filthy. He couldn’t have cared less about getting a bit messier. Offhandedly wiping his hands on his trousers, he continued onward.

The yao beast’s snores increased in volume, and the blasts of air grew heavier. Even the mire of corpses beneath his feet was getting progressively thicker. At last, his hand lightly touched the uneven skin of the yao beast. Following the skin, he slowly felt his way inside. As expected, the head and neck were covered with scales. Further down the neck was tough, bumpy skin. Even further beyond that, the skin grew thinner and more fragile.

By now the mire of corpses had reached Wei Wuxian’s waist. The majority of the corpses here had not been fully eaten, and the remaining parts were in bigger chunks—no longer a mire but a mound. Wei Wuxian reached behind his back to retrieve the arrows and branding irons, only to realize that the rods were caught on something.

He gripped the shafts and yanked hard before he managed to get them loose. In the process, the front end of one of the branding irons pried something out of the fleshy corpse mound, and it made a muffled clank as it fell.

Wei Wuxian instantly stilled. When there was no movement around him and the yao beast didn’t lash out, Wei Wuxian soundlessly heaved a sigh of relief. *One of the branding irons got stuck on something. Based on the sound, it was metal. And long. Let’s see if it’s anything useful—I’m short on weapons, so it’d be awesome if it’s a top-grade spiritual sword!*

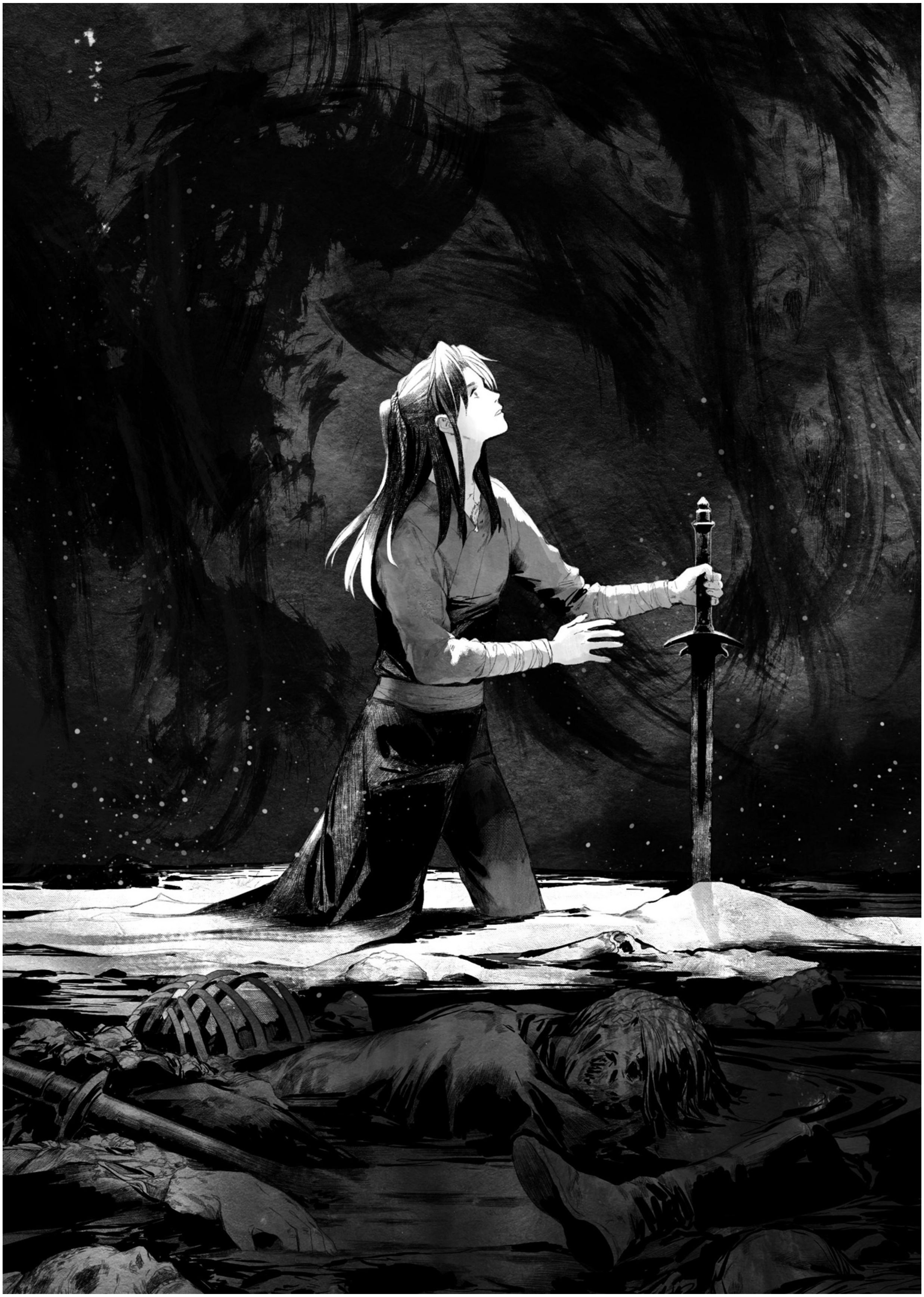
He reached out and touched the object that had fallen. It was long and blunt, and rust crawled along its surface.

The instant he grasped it, screams filled his ears. It sounded like thousands upon thousands of people wailing in despair. In a split second, a chill shot up his arm and traveled through the rest of his body. Wei Wuxian jolted and jerked his hand back.

What the heck is this? What strong resentment!

Just then, his surroundings suddenly lit up. A faint reddish-yellow glow cast Wei Wuxian’s shadow and illuminated the pitch-black iron sword in front of him. The sword was thrust at an oblique angle into his shadow, embedded right where his heart would be.

But this was inside the shell of the Xuanwu of Slaughter—how was there light?



Wei Wuxian whirled around. As he expected, a pair of large golden eyes were only a stone's throw away from him. It was then that he realized those muffled, thunderous snores had gone silent, and the faint reddish-yellow glow was coming from the eyes of the Xuanwu of Slaughter!

The Xuanwu of Slaughter bared its snaggled black and yellow fangs and roared.

Wei Wuxian, standing right in front of its mouth, was assailed head-on by the acoustic power of that roar. It hit him with such force that his eardrums almost ruptured, and his entire body cried out in pain. Seeing those gaping jaws coming for him, he hastily shoved the bundle of branding irons into its mouth. The timing and position were perfect—he wedged them between the yao beast's upper and lower jaw, not a second late or an inch short.

Now that the yao beast couldn't close its mouth, Wei Wuxian stabbed a bundle of arrows into the thinnest and weakest part of its skin. Although the arrows were slim, he'd bundled five apiece into one. He stabbed them so deep into the yao beast's flesh that even the fletching was buried. It was like he'd pierced it with a poisoned needle. Racked by the intense pain, the Xuanwu of Slaughter clamped down so hard on the branding irons holding its mouth open that they bent, folding into curled hooks.

Wei Wuxian stabbed a few more bundles of arrows into its soft skin. Never in its life had the yao beast known such grief. It went mad with pain, its serpentine body flailing hard inside the shell while its head thrashed. The mire of corpses also roiled and swirled, and the wave of putrid sludge almost engulfed Wei Wuxian entirely.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter widened both hideously yellow eyes and opened its jaws wide, as if it intended to swallow mountains and rivers in one gulp. The mire of corpses slushed into its mouth like a mighty flood. Wei Wuxian struggled desperately against the current, grabbing the hilt of an iron sword in his attempts. His mind went still and cold for a second, before those piercing wails and screams filled his ears once more.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter had already sucked Wei Wuxian's body into its mouth. Seeing the yao beast was about to chomp down, he grabbed the hilt of the iron sword and repeated the same trick as before, jamming it between the beast's upper and lower jaws.

The innards of centuries-old yao beasts like this one were normally very corrosive. If a human was swallowed, they'd instantly be dissolved into nothing but smoke!

Wei Wuxian firmly gripped the hilt of the iron sword, which wedged the creature's jaws open. The Xuanwu of Slaughter thrashed its head around for a while, unable to swallow the obstruction that prevented it from closing its mouth but still refusing to relax its bite and let go.

And finally, at long last, it charged out of its shell.

Having grown fearful of being stabbed by Wei Wuxian inside its shell, it did its utmost to squeeze its whole body outside, as if to escape—and so the tender flesh once concealed under scaly armor was now exposed. Lan Wangji, who had been waiting for a long time for this moment, had already lowered the bowstring into position above the shell's head hole. The moment the Xuanwu of Slaughter charged out, he reeled the bowstring back and stretched it tight. He strummed the string, causing it to vibrate and slice into the beast's flesh.

Under the combined efforts of the two, the yao beast could neither advance nor retreat. Being a malformed yao rather than a real divine beast, it had never been very intelligent to begin with, and now it was completely mad with pain. It flailed its head and tail as it barged violently around the black lake, raising mighty waves and thrashing whirlpools into being.

But no matter how much it rampaged, one youth that it could not bite nor devour was firmly wedged in its mouth, and the other youth was strangling its vital point with a bowstring, cutting into where its skin was thinnest inch by inch. The deeper it cut, the more blood gushed forth!

Lan Wangji kept the string yanked tight and taut, not loosening his grip for a single second.

This went on for six hours.

After six hours, the Xuanwu of Slaughter finally slowed. And then, its movements stopped completely.

The yao beast's neck was almost entirely severed by Lan Wangji's bowstring. Having overexerted himself, Lan Wangji's palms were also covered in wounds and drenched in fresh blood. The colossal shell floated on the surface of the black lake's waters, which were now visibly dyed purplish-red. The coppery stench was so thick that the scene seemed like a bloody punishment arena from purgatory.

Plop. Lan Wangji jumped into the water and swam to the beast's head. The eyes of the Xuanwu of Slaughter were still wide open, but its pupils had already glazed over. Its jaw, however, was still tightly clenched shut.

"Wei Ying!" Lang Wangji called out.

There was only silence from within the yao beast's mouth.

Lan Wangji thrust out his hands, grabbing the upper and lower rows of teeth in order to force them apart. With nowhere for his feet to find purchase in the water, it took a while to pry the fangs open. He saw the hilt of an ink-black iron sword wedged inside the Xuanwu of Slaughter's mouth. Both the tip of the sword and its hilt were embedded deep in the beast's flesh, while the blade had been bent into an arc.

Wei Wuxian's body was curled up like a shrimp. His head was bowed, both hands still clutching tightly at the sword's blunt blade. He was on the verge of sliding down the Xuanwu of Slaughter's throat. Lan Wangji immediately grabbed him by the collar and hauled him out. The moment the Xuanwu of Slaughter's jaws opened wider, the iron sword slipped into the water and sank to the bottom of the black lake.

Wei Wuxian's eyes were shut tight as he sprawled limply against Lan Wangji, one arm draped around the latter's shoulder. Wrapping an arm around Wei Wuxian's waist, Lan Wangji held him afloat in the bloody water.

"Wei Ying!"

His hands trembled. But just as he was about to touch Wei Wuxian's face, he jolted and suddenly came to.

"How'd it go? How'd it go? Is it dead? Is it dead?"

He was thrashing weakly as he spoke, causing the two of them to sink in the process. Lan Wangji tightened his hold around Wei Wuxian's waist.

"It is dead!"

Wei Wuxian's gaze was blank, like he was having some difficulty digesting the information. After thinking it over for a while, he exclaimed, “Dead? It’s dead? …Good! It’s dead. It kept screaming earlier…screaming while it thrashed around and knocked me out cold. Oh, that’s right, the tunnel! The underwater tunnel. Let’s get outta here. From the underwater tunnel.”

Lan Wangji found his reaction odd. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing!” Wei Wuxian had regained his energy. “Let’s get out now. There’s no time to lose.”

“Indeed.” Lan Wangji nodded. “I will carry you.”

“No need…”

Wei Wuxian started to protest, but Lan Wangji’s arm still encircled his waist in an iron grip. In a tone that brooked no argument, he ordered him, “Breathe in.”

Navigating the depths in such a dazed state was risky. Wei Wuxian didn’t like to act tough, so he simply nodded. Ignoring how filthy the bloody water was, the two took deep breaths and dove under.

After a while, they splashed through the surface of the purplish-red water once more. Wei Wuxian spat out a mouthful of bloody water and wiped his face, which smeared it with purplish-red and only made him look even more unkempt.

“What’s going on? Why is there no tunnel entrance?”

Jiang Cheng had said there was an underwater tunnel at the bottom of the black lake that could accommodate the passage of five or six people at the same time. The other disciples had escaped through that tunnel too. Wei Wuxian had initially thought that the entrance was blocked by the Xuanwu of Slaughter, which was why they couldn’t find it. However, though the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s corpse had already shifted position, there was still no underwater tunnel to be found in the spot it once occupied.

Lan Wangji’s hair dripped with water. He gave no response. The two exchanged a look, both having thought of a terrifying possibility. Perhaps…while the Xuanwu of Slaughter was frantically thrashing its limbs in intense pain, it had shaken the underwater rocks loose or kicked something, subsequently causing the only escape route to be…blocked off.

Wei Wuxian broke free from Lan Wangji's grasp and plunged beneath the water. Lan Wangji followed suit. But even after searching vigorously, they found no tunnel entrance. Not even a gap narrow enough to let only a single person through.

"What do we do?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji was silent for a moment, then replied, "Let us climb back ashore first."

Wei Wuxian waved his hand. "…Let's go."

Utterly exhausted, the two swam unhurriedly to shore. Both were wholly dyed a bloody hue of purplish-red when they rose out of the water. Wei Wuxian took off his clothes, wrung them out, and shook them hard as he cussed aloud.

"Are you kidding me?! I only went all out because I thought we'd have no chance at killing it if no one came to our rescue! But we actually managed to off it, only to have the son of a bastard[4] cave the tunnel in. Fuck me!"

Lan Wangji's brows twitched when he heard the word "fuck" slip forth. He wanted to say something but held himself back. Wei Wuxian swore up a storm as he shook his clothes dry. All of a sudden, his legs gave out, and Lan Wangji quickly stepped forward to catch him.

Holding on to Lan Wangji's arm for support, Wei Wuxian assured him, "I'm fine, I'm fine, just out of strength. Oh right, Lan Zhan—did you see the sword I was holding onto in its mouth? Where is it?"

"It sank to the bottom of the lake," Lan Wangji replied. "Why?"

"Sank?" Wei Wuxian replied. "Forget it, then."

When he'd gripped that sword, a torrent of earth-shattering screams had assailed him without pause, leaving him chilled and disoriented. The iron sword had to be special in some way. The Xuanwu of Slaughter had consumed at least five thousand people, some of whom must have been alive when they were dragged into its shell. The sword might have been left behind by a cultivator who had been devoured. Hidden inside the creature's shell for at least four hundred years, buried in a mound of corpses, it had surely been contaminated by the resentment and agony of countless people both dead and alive, soaking in their screams.

Wei Wuxian had wanted to hang on to the sword so he could get a good look at it. But since it had sunk and they were both trapped with no way to get out, he might as well not bother. They'd just wind up arguing pointlessly again if he kept going on about it and Lan Wangji started to suspect his intentions.

Wei Wuxian waved dismissively and thought, *Nothing good ever happens!*

He dragged his feet as he shuffled forward, and Lan Wangji quietly followed behind him. Not two steps later, Wei Wuxian's legs gave out again. And Lan Wangji caught him again. This time, he held a hand to his forehead.

After a moment, he said, "Wei Ying, you…are burning up."

Wei Wuxian plopped his hand on Lan Wangji's forehead too. "So are you."

Lan Wangji removed his hand and said mildly, "Your hand is what is cold."

"I *am* a little dizzy," Wei Wuxian agreed.

Several days ago, Wei Wuxian had tossed all the crushed medicinal herbs in the perfume sachet onto Lan Wangji's leg. He'd only wiped down his own burn from the branding iron and hadn't rested well over the past few days. To top it all off, he'd been rummaging around in corpse sludge and lake water. His condition had finally deteriorated from these various assaults, and he was now running a fever.

Wei Wuxian pushed himself to walk until he could no longer move his feet. Feeling increasingly dizzy, he sat down where he was and puzzled over his situation.

"How did I get a fever so easily? I haven't had one in years."

Lan Wangji didn't feel like commenting on the "so easily" remark. "Lie down," he ordered.

Wei Wuxian complied, and Lan Wangji took his hand in his own to channel spiritual power to him. Wei Wuxian lay there for a while before he tried to sit up again.

“Lie still,” Lan Wangji chastised him.

Wei Wuxian pulled his hand back. “There’s no need to channel anything to me. You don’t even have much left for yourself.”

Lan Wangji caught his hand again. “Lie still,” he repeated.

A few days ago, Lan Wangji had been drained of energy and subjected to Wei Wuxian’s tormenting and teasing. Now, it was finally Wei Wuxian’s turn. All he could do was let Lan Wangji do as he wished. But even lying down, he couldn’t stand the quiet. It didn’t take long before he started whining.

“The ground’s hard. It’s uncomfortable.”

“What do you want?” Lan Wangji asked.

“To lie somewhere else.”

“Where else do you want to lie at a time like this?”

“Lend me your lap, won’t you?”

Lan Wangji was expressionless. “Stop fooling around.”

“I’m serious,” Wei Wuxian complained. “I feel so dizzy, and you’re not a girl, so what does it matter?”

“Even so, you cannot lie on me as you please,” Lan Wangji said.

Seeing him frown, Wei Wuxian pressed on. “I’m not fooling around, *you’re* the one throwing a fuss. I can’t take this lying down. Lan Zhan, tell me. Why?”

“Why what?” Lan Wangji countered.

With some difficulty, Wei Wuxian rolled over to lie prone on the ground. “Everyone says I’m annoying but secretly likes me deep down. But when it comes to you, why are you always giving me the stink eye? We’ve been through life and death together, but you aren’t even willing to lend me your lap to rest on. And you want to lecture me too. What are you? An old man?”

“Your fever is making you delirious,” Lan Wangji said quietly.

Maybe that was indeed the case, since Wei Wuxian fell asleep a short while later. As he slept, he felt rather comfortable—like he really was pillowed on someone's lap and like there really was a pleasantly cool hand resting on his forehead. No one admonished him as he happily rolled back and forth to his heart's content; when he rolled off and onto the ground, he could've sworn he felt someone stroke his head before gathering him up to continue resting upon that lap.

Once he woke up, he was still lying on the ground—though there was now a pile of leaves cushioning the back of his head, which made it a little more comfortable. Lan Wangji sat far away from him. He had built a fire, and the light gave his face a warm, gentle, and refined appearance, like beautiful jade.

Just a dream, like I thought, Wei Wuxian concluded.

Trapped in the underground cave with their escape route severed, the two could only wait for the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng to come to their rescue.

Another two days passed. In those two days, Wei Wuxian burned with a low fever, alternating between consciousness and unconsciousness. It was only thanks to Lan Wangji intermittently channeling spiritual power to him that he was able to somehow keep his condition from deteriorating further.

“Ahh…! So bored.” Wei Wuxian whined.

“I’m really so bored,” Wei Wuxian continued.

“It’s too quiet,” Wei Wuxian persisted.

“Ugh…” Wei Wuxian complained louder.

“I’m hungry,” Wei Wuxian announced. “Lan Zhan, get up and make me something to eat, will you? Get us some of that tortoise’s meat.

“Never mind, forget it. The meat of a man-eating yao beast must stink. You’d better stay where you are.

“Lan Zhan, why are you like this? So dull. You have your mouth shut and your eyes shut too, and you don’t talk to me or look at me. Are you meditating the Buddhist way? Are you a monk? Oh, right. Your ancestor actually was a monk. I forgot.”

“Quiet,” Lan Wangji said. “You are still running a fever. Do not speak. Conserve your strength.”

“You finally responded,” Wei Wuxian said. “How many days have we been waiting? Why hasn’t anyone come to our rescue yet?”

“It has not even been a single day,” Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian covered his face. “Why is this so hard to endure? It must be because I’m with you. If only Jiang Cheng was the one who’d stayed.

Trading barbs with him would be more fun than lying around like this with you. Jiang Cheng! Where the hell did you go?! It's been almost seven days!"

Lan Wangji jabbed a branch into the fire with a force that gave off an unexpected burst of sword aura. Embers erupted and danced in the air.

"Rest," he said frostily.

Still facing Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian curled up like a shrimp again. "Are you for real? I just woke up, and you tell me to rest. Are you so against seeing me awake?"

Withdrawing the branch, Lan Wangji replied with dignity, "You are overthinking."

Nothing ever gets to him. He's impervious to everything, Wei Wuxian thought. *Not at all like he was a few days ago—face as dark as the bottom of a pot, full of temper, biting when pushed too hard. But that side of Lan Zhan can only be encountered by luck, not sought out. I'll probably never have the chance to see it again.*

"I'm so bored," Wei Wuxian whined aloud. "Lan Zhan, let's chat. You start."

"When do you usually retire for rest?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Man, your opening topic is so boring," Wei Wuxian said. "It's sooo dry that I don't feel like answering at all. But I'll answer out of consideration for you, so here goes—I always sleep after chou time back at Lotus Pier. I often stay up all night."

"Such profligacy. A bad habit," Lan Wangji commented.

"You think everyone is like your family?" Wei Wuxian retorted.

"You need to rectify it," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian covered his ears. "I'm sick. I'm running a fever. Lan-er-gege, can you say something a little more pleasant? Comfort pitiful little me?"

Lan Wangji kept his mouth sealed and said nothing.

"Dunno how? All right. I knew it. Then if you don't know how to talk, can you sing? Will you sing me a song?"

He was just running his mouth to while away the time, prattling on and on. He never expected Lan Wangji to agree. But to his surprise, after a moment's silence, a soft, gentle voice started to resonate through the spacious cave.

Lan Wangji was actually humming.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes and turned over to stretch out his limbs. "That sounds nice."

Then he asked, "What's the name of that song?"

Lan Wangji seemed to murmur something under his breath.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. "What was that again?"

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Chapter 12:
Sandu: The Three Poisons

— Part 1 —

HE NEVER DID CATCH the name of that song. The buzzing in his ears was ceaseless. Blood rushed to his aching head, and the fever burned every limb and joint sore.

When he woke again, the first thing Wei Wuxian saw was not the pitch-black ceiling of the underground cave, nor Lan Wangji's pale and handsome face. Instead, he saw a wooden board with drawings of silly little kissy faces.

It was graffiti he'd scribbled on the wooden headboard of his bed at Lotus Pier. He was lying in his own bed. Jiang Yanli sat next to him, reading with her head lowered, but when she noticed him awake, her mild brows immediately arched in surprise.

"A-Xian!" she cried in delight as she put down her book.

"Shijie!" Wei Wuxian responded in kind.

He strained to sit up. His body wasn't feverish anymore, but it was still weak, and his throat was a little dry.

"I'm back?" he asked. "When did I get out of the cave? Was it Jiang-shushu who came with reinforcements to rescue me? Where's Lan Zhan? Jiang Cheng?"

The wooden door opened, and Jiang Cheng walked in with a white porcelain pot in his hand.

"Stop that racket!" he barked at Wei Wuxian, then turned to Jiang Yanli. "Jie, I brought over the soup you made."

Jiang Yanli took the pot and ladled out a bowl of its contents.

Wei Wuxian beckoned him. "Jiang Cheng, you li'l shit. C'mere!"

"Why? So you can kneel and thank me?" Jiang Cheng snapped back.

"You took seven days! Were you trying to kill me?!"

"Well, did you die? Then who am I talking to?"

"It only takes five days at most to get back to Yunmeng from Mount Muxi!"

"Are you stupid?" Jiang Cheng retorted. "You only counted the time it took to get back here, not the time spent trekking back *again* to collect you! And after returning to Mount Muxi, I still had to lead a bunch of people all over the mountain to search for that old banyan tree, then dig out the hole Wen Chao filled in! You should be crying tears of gratitude that I rescued you in only seven days!"

Upon reflection, Wei Wuxian was struck speechless. He really had forgotten to consider the return trip. "Guess that sounds right. But why didn't Lan Zhan remind me?"

"He gets irritated enough at the mere sight of you! You expect him to always listen to everything you say?" Jiang Cheng pointed out.

"Point taken!"

Having finished ladling out a portion of soup, Jiang Yanli delivered the bowl into Wei Wuxian's hands. The soup was piping hot and steamed with a rich, delicious aroma. It had chunks of lotus roots and pork ribs, both slow-cooked until the skins were mouthwateringly soft and pink. Wei Wuxian hadn't eaten for days while trapped in the cave, so he couldn't get back on solid food just yet—making soup perfect. He thanked his shijie, then hugged the bowl close and started gobbling down the contents.

"Where's Lan Zhan? He was rescued too, right?" he asked as he ate. "Is he here? Or did he go back home to Gusu?"

"Obviously," Jiang Cheng replied. "It's not like he's from our family, so why would he come here? Of course he went back to Gusu."

"He went back alone?" Wei Wuxian asked. "His home in Gusu…"

Before he could finish, Jiang Fengmian entered the room. Wei Wuxian put down his bowl and greeted him aloud. "Jiang-shushu!"

"You can remain seated," Jiang Fengmian said.

Jiang Yanli passed Wei Wuxian a handkerchief to wipe his mouth with. “Is the soup good?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t take the handkerchief but instead dramatically puckered his lips while squinting happily. “Super good!”

“Don’t you have hands?!” Jiang Cheng scolded.

Jiang Yanli chuckled as she wiped Wei Wuxian’s mouth and chin for him, then cheerfully exited the room with the dirty dishes. Jiang Fengmian sat down where she had been and glanced at the white porcelain pot like he also wanted a taste. Unfortunately, Jiang Yanli had taken the bowl with her.

“Father,” Jiang Cheng said. “Are the Wens still refusing to return our swords?”

Jiang Fengmian tore his gaze away from the pot. “They are currently celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Celebrating Wen Chao, who single-handedly slew the Xuanwu of Slaughter,” Jiang Fengmian replied.

When he heard this, Wei Wuxian almost fell out of bed. “The *Wens* killed it?!”

Jiang Cheng snorted. “How else did you think the official story would go? Were you expecting them to say *you* killed it?”

“Shameless Wen dogs spewing nonsense,” Wei Wuxian spat. “It was clearly offed by Lan Zhan.”

Jiang Fengmian curled his lips in a soft smile. “Is that right? What a coincidence. The second young master of the Lan family told me *you* slew it. So who was it, exactly?”

“I guess it was a combined effort,” Wei Wuxian said, doubtfully. “But he was the one who dealt the fatal blow. All I did was sneak into the yao beast’s shell and scare it out. Lan Zhan waited outside for it all by himself and wore it down for six straight hours before it finally died.”

He gave Jiang Cheng and his father a summary of the main events of their time underground. Jiang Cheng wore a complicated expression as he listened, and it took some time before he could manage a reply.

“Pretty much the same as Lan Wangji’s version. Given both accounts, it’s obvious you two killed the beast together. What is yours is yours. Why give him all the credit?”

“I’m not,” Wei Wuxian said. “I just think that in comparison, I really didn’t put in that much effort.”

Jiang Fengmian nodded. “Well done.”

But slaying a colossal, four-centuries-old yao beast at the age of seventeen was a feat worthy of more than a mere “well done.”

“Yes, congratulations to you,” said Jiang Cheng.

His tone was rather odd, but seeing his crossed arms and arched brows, Wei Wuxian could tell that he was just being sour again. Jiang Cheng had to be feeling both insecure and troubled right now, fussing over why he hadn’t been the one who stayed behind to slay the yao beast and how he would definitely have done this or that if he’d stayed…

Wei Wuxian laughed aloud. “Too bad you weren’t around, or you’d get credit too. And you could’ve chatted with me to help with the boredom. *My god*, I nearly died from boredom, whiling away the days sitting face-to-face with Lan Zhan.”

“It serves you right,” Jiang Cheng scolded. “You shouldn’t have rushed to the forefront, and you shouldn’t have bothered with this crap! If you hadn’t started it in the first place…”

“Jiang Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian suddenly interrupted.

Realizing he’d gone too far, Jiang Cheng froze for a moment and quickly quieted. Jiang Fengmian did not appear reproachful, but his expression had turned from calm to solemn.

“Do you understand exactly how you went astray with your words?”

Jiang Cheng hung his head. “Yes.”

Wei Wuxian tried to defuse the situation. “He’s just letting off some steam, nothing serious.”

Seeing that Jiang Cheng’s words didn’t really match what was in his heart, and that he still looked rather indignant, Jiang Fengmian shook his head.

“A-Cheng, some things shouldn’t be so easily said, even when angry. Saying such things demonstrates your lack of understanding of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng’s motto. You did not…”

A woman’s sharp, cold voice came from outside the door. “You’re right, he doesn’t understand. But what does it matter, as long as Wei Ying gets it!”

Like a streak of purple lightning, Madam Yu swept in with a blast of cold wind. She stood about five steps away from Wei Wuxian’s bed, brows arched high.

“‘Attempt the Impossible.’ Well, isn’t he the perfect example!” she exclaimed. “He knows perfectly well what might invite trouble on our family, but he still provokes it!”

“San-Niangzi,” Jiang Fengmian said. “Why are you here?”

“Why am I here?” Madam Yu spat. “What a laugh! I can’t believe I’m being questioned like this. Does Sect Leader Jiang recall that *I* am the mistress of Lotus Pier? Do you recall that every inch of this land is part of *my* domain? Do you recall which one is *your* son? Is it the one lying in bed, or the one standing there?!”

She had repeatedly posed these questions for many years now.

“Of course,” Jiang Fengmian replied.

Madam Yu sneered. “You certainly do. But what does it matter? There is not a single day that Wei Ying will rest until he stirs up some kind of trouble! If I had known better, I would’ve forbidden him from leaving and made him stay in Lotus Pier. Would Wen Chao really have dared do anything to the two young masters of the Lan Clan of Gusu and the Jin Clan of Lanling? Even if he had, it would’ve been their own bad luck. Who are you to play the hero?”

Whenever Jiang Fengmian was present, Wei Wuxian was forced to grant Madam Yu face and not utter a single word in retort. But in his mind, he thought, *Wouldn’t dare to do anything to them? Yeah, right*.

“I’ve made my point,” Madam Yu concluded. “Mark my words. One day he’ll bring disaster on our family!”

Jiang Fengmian rose to his feet. “Let’s talk when we get back.”

“Talk about what?” Madam Yu snapped. “Get back where? I’m speaking right here. I’ve no guilt on my conscience, either way! Jiang Cheng, come here.”

Caught between his parents, Jiang Cheng hesitated for a moment before going to stand by his mother’s side. Madam Yu caught his shoulders and pushed Jiang Cheng in front of Jiang Fengmian for him to see.

“Sect Leader Jiang, it seems there are some things that I must clarify. Take a good look. This. This one is your son by blood. The future master of Lotus Pier. Even if you can’t stand the sight of him because he came from me, his surname is still Jiang! I refuse to believe you haven’t heard the gossip—that after so many years, Sect Leader Jiang is still obsessed with a certain Sanren and sees his old friend’s son as his own. Everyone speculates whether Wei Ying is your…”

“Yu Ziyuan!” Jiang Fengmian barked.

Madam Yu shouted right back. “Jiang Fengmian! Do you think raising your voice changes anything?! Oh, I know you…”

They left, still arguing. Madam Yu’s furious voice only grew progressively louder as they departed, and Jiang Fengmian argued back as well, forcibly suppressing his temper. Jiang Cheng stood rooted to the spot, stunned. After a long moment, he shot Wei Wuxian a look and turned to leave as well.

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian called after him.

Jiang Cheng didn’t respond, already hurrying toward the veranda. Wei Wuxian had to roll out of bed to chase after him, lugging his stiff, sore body all the way.

“Jiang Cheng! Jiang Cheng!”

Jiang Cheng kept walking onward with his head down. Wei Wuxian flew into a rage and pounced on him, seizing him by the neck as he did.

“Answer me if you hear me! You lookin’ for a fight?!”

“Get the hell back to bed and stay there!” Jiang Cheng yelled.

“Nope, we gotta clear the air and set things straight!” Wei Wuxian said. “Don’t you believe any of that nonsensical bullshit.”

“What nonsensical bullshit?” Jiang Cheng asked frostily.

“The things that foul the mouth when said out loud,” Wei Wuxian said. “My mom and dad are real people and have names. I can’t stand when people blindly assign me to other families!”

He put his arm around Jiang Cheng’s shoulders and dragged him over to the veranda railings to sit down.

“Let’s talk openly instead of bottling up these awkward feelings. You are Jiang-shushu’s son, the future head of the Jiang Clan. Of course Jiang-shushu will be stricter with you.”

Jiang Cheng regarded him askance.

“But I’m different,” Wei Wuxian continued. “I’m someone else’s son. My mom and dad were both good friends with Jiang-shushu, so of course he’s gotta be nicer to me. You understand this logic, right?”

Jiang Cheng humphed. “He’s not strict with me. He just doesn’t like me.”

“Who doesn’t like their own son? Stop imagining things!” Wei Wuxian argued. “I’ll beat every single one of those rumor-spreading gossip hounds when I see them—beat them so hard their own moms won’t recognize them!”

“It’s true, though,” Jiang Cheng persisted. “He doesn’t like my mom, and so by proxy he doesn’t like me either.”

This was difficult to rebut.

The entire cultivation world knew that Yu San-Niangzi had been Jiang Fengmian’s peer in cultivation from a young age. They had known each other since their teenage years. Jiang Fengmian was temperate in character, while Yu Ziyuan was assertive and stern. While they were well matched in status, they’d had little significant interaction, so no one assumed they would pair up.

And then, Cangse-sanren emerged from the immortal’s mountain and joined the world. She established a friendship with Jiang Fengmian while passing through Yunmeng. They had great mutual admiration for each other’s skills and Night Hunted together many times. Speculation abounded that Cangse-sanren was extremely likely to become the next mistress of Lotus Pier.

To everyone's surprise, it was around this time that the Yu Clan of Meishan proposed a marriage alliance with the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng.

While the Sect Leader of the Jiang Clan at the time was quite interested in this union, Jiang Fengmian was not inclined to agree. He disliked Yu Ziyuan's character and personality, and did not think the two of them would make a good match. He politely declined the proposal many times, but the Yu Clan of Meishan exerted tremendous pressure on him from multiple angles. He was young and unestablished at the time, and soon after, Cangse-sanren became cultivation partners with Wei Changze—Jiang Fengmian's most loyal servant. The two left to travel faraway lands, and Jiang Fengmian finally admitted defeat.

Although Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan did marry, they ended up a begrudging couple. They lived separately year-round and never saw eye to eye. Other than consolidating the power of the two clans, it was hard to say what else was gained from this union.

The founding father of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jiang Chi, came from a knight-errant background. The family was exuberant, honest, magnanimous, and carefree in its ways —all of which were in complete opposition to Madam Yu's spirit. Jiang Cheng took after his mother in looks and personality, which had never been to Jiang Fengmian's liking. He had tried to educate Jiang Cheng in a myriad of ways, but it had all been for naught. This was why it always appeared as though he didn't favor his son.

Jiang Cheng shrugged off Wei Wuxian's hand and stood up.

"I know! I know that he doesn't like my personality, that I'm not the successor he wants," he ranted. "He doesn't think I'm worthy of being the family head or that I understand the Jiang family's motto or the precepts—that I've not a single bit of Jiang character in my bones. I know!"

Voice rising higher, Jiang Cheng continued. "You and Lan Wangji slew the Xuanwu of Slaughter together. What a brave and bloody fight! How *commendable*! But what about me?!" Teeth clenched, he slammed a fist onto the pillar of the veranda. "…I ran around for days too. I ran myself ragged, without even a second of rest!"

“What do the family precepts matter?!” Wei Wuxian countered. “Do we have to follow them just because they exist? Look at the precepts of the Lan Clan—there’s over three thousand of them! If you obey every single one, how will you *live*?”

He hopped down from the wooden railing. “And—does a family head *have to* exemplify every family trait? Obey every family precept? The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng has had so many family heads in its history. I refuse to believe they were all the same. Even the Lan Clan of Gusu produced an unusual case like Lan Yi, but who dares deny her strength and position? Who dares not count her among the renowned cultivators of the Lan Clan? Who could deny her Killing Chord technique?”

Jiang Cheng was quiet, but he seemed to have calmed down a little. Wei Wuxian put an arm around his shoulders again.

“When you become the family head, I’ll be your subordinate. We’ll be just like our fathers. Who cares about the Twin Jades of Lan? Our Yunmeng has Twin Heroes! So—just shut up. Who said you’re not worthy of being family head? No one’s allowed to say that, not even you. Say it and you’re asking to get beat.”

Jiang Cheng snorted. “In your current state? Who are you gonna beat?”

He smacked Wei Wuxian’s chest. While the brand had already been treated with salve and bandaged, it still hurt to have it smacked so suddenly.

Wei Wuxian roared. “Jiang Cheng! *You’re dead!*”

Jiang Cheng dodged his strike. “*Now* you’re in pain. Why did you play the hero then?! Serves you right! That’ll teach you!”

“Was I playing the hero? The situation forced my hand; I acted before I thought!” Wei Wuxian countered. “Stop running and I’ll spare your little life. I’ve gotta ask you something! There was a perfume sachet stuffed in my belt, an empty one. Have you seen it?”

“The one Mianmian gave you?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Nope.”

Wei Wuxian let out a disappointed noise. “What a shame! I’ll ask her for another one next time.”

Jiang Cheng frowned. “There you go again. You don’t actually like her, do you? The girl’s looks are okay, but her background’s nothing of note. She’s probably the daughter of some servant and might not even be a sect disciple.”

“What’s wrong with servants?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Aren’t I the son of a servant too?”

“Are you two the same?” Jiang Cheng was incredulous. “Who has a servant like you—one whose mistress peels them lotus seeds and makes them soup? I haven’t even gotten a taste of that soup yet!”

“If you want some, then ask shijie to make more,” Wei Wuxian said. “By the way, you mentioned Lan Zhan earlier. Did he not leave a message for me? Did anyone find his brother yet? How’re things at his place?”

“You were hoping he left a message for you?” Jiang Cheng snorted. “You’re lucky he didn’t leave you with a stab wound. He went back home. Lan Xichen hasn’t been found yet, and Lan Qiren is in a terrible fix.”

Wei Wuxian continued his endless questions. “What about the Lan family head? How is he?”

“Passed away,” Jiang Cheng replied.

Wei Wuxian blinked. “…Passed away?”

The image of Lan Wangji’s tear-streaked face illuminated by the glow of firelight flashed through his mind.

“How’s Lan Zhan doing?” he blurted.

“How *else* could he be?” Jiang Cheng said. “He went back home. Father offered to send escorts with him, but he declined. Judging by how he looked at the time, he probably saw it coming. After all, with things as they are now, no one’s family is faring better than anyone else’s.”

The two sat back down on the railing again.

“So what’s going on with Lan Xichen?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Didn’t the Wens burn their Library Pavilion? The Lan family managed to salvage some of their tens of thousands of ancient scriptures and musical scores. What they could save was probably handed to Lan

Xichen so he could run off and protect it. Otherwise, everything would be gone. That's what everyone is guessing."

Wei Wuxian gazed at the sky for a moment, then commented, "Disgusting."

"Yeah," Jiang Cheng agreed. "The Wens are disgusting beyond belief."

Wei Wuxian started to run his mouth. "How long are they gonna keep this up? We've so many clans. Can we not just form an alliance and…"

Just then, a chorus of footsteps approached. A group of boys in light training robes dashed across the long veranda like monkeys, shouting as they ran.

"Da-shixiong!"

Liu-shidi cried in delight, "Da-shixiong! You've been resurrected!"

"Hey! What do you mean 'resurrected'?" Wei Wuxian was indignant. "I was never dead!"

"Da-shixiong! We heard you slew a huge four-century-old yao beast! Is that true?! Were you really the one who killed it?!"

"What *I* wanna know is whether it's true that you didn't eat for seven days?!"

"You haven't secretly been studying inedia behind our backs?!"

"How big was the Xuanwu of Slaughter? Could it have fit in Lotus Pier?!"

"The Xuanwu of Slaughter is just a tortoise, right?!"

"Da-shixiong, you were with Lan Wangji from Gusu the whole seven days, right? He actually didn't beat you to death?!"

The somewhat solemn atmosphere was instantly shattered into a complete circus.

Wei Wuxian's injuries weren't all that serious. It was simply that they hadn't been treated with medicine in a timely manner, and he'd exhausted himself on an empty stomach. But he had a strong constitution, so once the brand on his chest had some salve slathered on it, it soon stopped burning. With only a few days of lying around, he was full of energy again.

After the incident with the Xuanwu of Slaughter at Mount Muxi, the "Educational Office" the Wen Clan established at Qishan was completely dismantled. The disciples all returned to their respective clans. Wen Chao's side wasn't pursuing the matter further for the time being, and Madam Yu took this chance to give Wei Wuxian a good tongue-lashing. She ordered him to never set so much as half a foot out of Lotus Pier's gates. He was forbidden from even rowing boats or swimming in the lake, and could only while away the days shooting kites with the Jiang Clan juniors and sect disciples.

No matter how fun a game might be, playing it every single day grew dull. After half a month, the boys' interest waned further and further. Wei Wuxian couldn't find it in himself to be excited, either, and let his shots sail off wherever they wanted. For the first time ever, he let Jiang Cheng take first place a number of times.

That day, after the last round of shooting had concluded, Wei Wuxian cupped his hands over his eyes and gazed at the remnant rays of the setting sun.

"Let's stop and pack up. Head home for dinner."

"So early today?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Wei Wuxian chucked his bow away and sat on the ground, looking downcast and frustrated. "I'm not shooting anymore, it's boring. Who placed last? Go on and collect the kites with Liu-shidi."

One of the boys said, "Da-shixiong, you're so sly. You always make other people do pickups, what a cheat."

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "I've got no choice. Madam Yu won't let me leave the grounds, yanno? She's at home right now, isn't she? Who knows—maybe Jinzhu and Yinzhu are crouched in some corner, watching so they can report me at a moment's notice. If I set a toe outside, Madam Yu will flay me alive with her lash."

The shidi who came in last when shooting joked around before they left, laughing, to go collect kites. Jiang Cheng stood and Wei Wuxian sat, and the two chatted for a moment.

"Jiang-shushu left this morning, but why is he not back yet? Will he make it back in time for dinner?"

Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu had had another fight that morning. Though “fight” wasn’t quite the word for it—it was Madam Yu raging on her own while Jiang Fengmian mostly maintained his manners throughout.

“He’s gone to the Wens again for our swords, hasn’t he?” Jiang Cheng replied. Revulsion showed on his face. “Whenever I remember that my Sandu is being manhandled by some Wen dog, I just…”

“Too bad our swords haven’t accumulated enough qi,” Wei Wuxian commented. “If they could seal themselves, no one would stand a chance at prying them out of their sheaths.”

“If you cultivate for another eighty years, maybe,” Jiang Cheng commented.

Suddenly, the shidi who’d gone on kite-fetching duty rushed back into the drilling grounds of Lotus Pier, crying in alarm. “We’ve got a big problem! Da-shixiong, shixiong, bad news!”

Wei Wuxian immediately stood up. “What’s going on?”

“Where’s Liu-shidi?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Why are we down a person?”

Liu-shidi had been the first one out the door earlier but was now nowhere to be seen. One of the boys said, still out of breath, “Liu-shidi was taken!”

“Taken?!”

Wei Wuxian picked up his bow. With weapon in hand, he demanded, “Who took him? Why was he taken?!”

“I don’t know!” that boy cried. “I don’t know why he was taken!”

Now Jiang Cheng was anxious as well. “What do you mean you don’t know why?”

“Let’s not lose our heads,” Wei Wuxian said. “Tell us exactly what happened.”

“Just…just, when we just went out to collect the kites, they’d all fallen way over there, super far away,” the boy began. “We went over and saw around a dozen people. They’re from the Wen Clan; they’re dressed in their uniforms. There are sect disciples and servants, and the one leading them was a young woman. She had one of the kites in her hand, with an arrow in it. When she saw us, she asked who the kite belonged to.”

Another boy said, “That kite belonged to Liu-shidi, so he said it was his. The woman suddenly got all mad and said, ‘How dare you?!’ and ordered her subordinates to take him away!”

“Just like that?” Wei Wuxian asked.

The boys nodded. “We asked why they were taking Liu-shidi, and that woman kept saying he’d ‘committed a grave offense’ and ‘harbored mutinous intent.’ She yelled for her lackeys to take him away. We couldn’t do anything to stop them, so we ran back here.”

Jiang Cheng swore. “Not even a reason to detain someone! Are the Wens looking to be gods?!”

“Yeah! They make no sense at all!”

“Everyone, stop,” Wei Wuxian said. “The Wens will probably be knocking on our door soon. Don’t let them hear anything that can be used against us. Let me ask you: that woman, she wasn’t carrying a sword, right? Was she kind of pretty, with a mole above her mouth?”

“Yes! That’s her!” the group of shidi said.

Jiang Cheng spat hatefully, “Wang Lingjiao! That…”

Just then, a woman’s cold voice was heard. “What’s all the racket? Not even a day of quiet around here!”

With her purple robes aflutter, Madam Yu approached. Jinzhu and Yinzhu were dressed in full martial arts gear, following behind her and covering her left and right flank.

“Mom, the Wens are here,” Jiang Cheng called to her. “They’ve taken Liu-shidi!”

“You’re all so loud. I heard everything from inside,” Madam Yu replied. “So what? He was seized, not killed. So quick to stomp your feet and grit your teeth—is that how a future sect leader should act? Stay calm!”

She then turned to face the main gates that stood in front of the drilling grounds. Over a dozen Wen cultivators filed in, all dressed in blazing sun uniforms. From behind the cultivators, a woman in colorful robes sashayed into the grounds.

She was lithe and graceful in figure, and charming in appearance. Her eyes reflected the bright and clear waters of autumn, and her lips were as red as blazing fire with a tiny black mole dotted above them. An exceptional beauty—except for the fact that she'd festooned herself with far too many gaudy hairpins and rings, as if she were trying her hardest to wear an entire jewelry shop as well as flaunt all the favor her nobleman showed her. The result was incredibly tasteless.

She was the one Wei Wuxian had sent flying and spewing blood with a smack back at Qishan—Wang Lingjiao.

Wang Lingjiao pursed her lips in a smile. "Madam Yu. I've come again!"

Madam Yu was expressionless. Seeming to think that speaking a single word to this woman would soil her mouth, she waited until Wang Lingjiao descended the steps from the main gates before she curtly demanded, "Why did you seize a disciple from my Jiang Clan of Yunmeng?"

"Seize?" Wang Lingjiao asked. "You mean the one we arrested outside? It's a long story. Let's go inside and sit down first, then we'll talk about it, hmm?"

A servant such as this, walking through the front doors of a prominent clan without prior notice or any request for permission to enter—a servant then demanding so unapologetically to enter the main hall to "sit down and talk." Madam Yu's face was growing progressively more frigid. Veins bulged slightly on the back of her fair hand, and the finger wearing Zidian's silver ring twitched.

"Go inside, sit down, and talk?" she repeated.

"Of course," Wang Lingjiao said. "The last time I came to deliver orders, I didn't have the time to sit and stay a while. Please, go ahead."

When he heard the word "orders," Jiang Cheng snorted. Jinzhu and Yinzhu's expressions also darkened with anger. But Wang Lingjiao was favored by Wen Chao, and they couldn't risk offending her. Which was why, though Madam Yu's expression was dripping with sneering disdain and her tone soaked in contempt, she still had no choice but to accept.

"Very well. Go in, then."

Wang Lingjiao flashed a charming smile before she really did flounce right inside.

Although she'd said she wanted to go inside and sit, she didn't immediately take a seat. Instead, she strolled around Lotus Pier, ogling the grounds with rapt interest, giving commentary as she went:

"Lotus Pier really isn't bad. It's so big, but it's just that all the houses are real old…

"The wood is all black, what an ugly color. Not bright at all.

"Madam Yu, you're kind of failing as a mistress. Don't you know how to decorate? Hang some red gauze curtains next time. That'd look *much* better."

Wang Lingjiao jabbed her finger all around and criticized as she walked, as if this were her own back garden. All the while Madam Yu's brows twitched nonstop, so much so that Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng suspected she might go ballistic and kick off a killing spree at any moment.

Once the commentary-filled tour had concluded, Wang Lingjiao finally took a seat in the main hall. Though no one had invited or conceded to her, she walked up to the head seat herself and presumptuously sat down. When no one came to attend her after she'd sat a while, she frowned and smacked her palm on the table.

"Where's the tea?"

Although she was decked out in dazzling jewelry, her speech and behavior reflected no manners or education. What little grace she possessed was spoiled in hundreds of ways. But after that tour, no one was surprised.

Madam Yu sat down in the second seat. The hems of her expansive purple robe and sleeves spread outward with the motion, accentuating her slender waist and beautiful posture. Jinzhu and Yinzhu stood tall behind her, with mocking smiles on their lips.

"There is no tea," Yinzhu answered. "Pour it yourself if you want it."

Wang Lingjiao’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Don’t the Jiang servants do any work?”

“The servants of the Jiang family have more important and serious matters to attend to,” Jinzhu replied. “There is no need to rely on an intermediary to fetch tea and water. Your own arms and legs are perfectly capable.”

Wang Lingjiao eyed the two girls up and down. “And who are *you* two?”

“My handmaids,” Madam Yu answered.

“Madam Yu, your Jiang Clan is too outrageous,” Wang Lingjiao said disdainfully. “This won’t do. Even handmaids dare interrupt people in the main hall? Servants like *those* would’ve been disciplined at the Wen family house with a slap to the face.”

Saying that like you’re not a servant yourself. Wei Wuxian thought.

Madam Yu was completely unmoved. “Jinzhu and Yinzhu are no ordinary servants. They have been by my side since they were young and serve no one besides myself. No one can slap their faces. It is forbidden. And besides, no one would dare.”

“Madam Yu, what are you saying?” Wang Lingjiao gasped. “The hierarchy within a prominent clan must be clear enough to ensure no confusion! Servants ought to act like servants.”

When she heard “servants ought to act like servants,” Madam Yu looked like she couldn’t have agreed more. She shot Wei Wuxian a look, then responded with surprising agreement in her haughty tone.

“Indeed.” But then she immediately launched into questioning. “For what reason have you seized my Jiang sect disciple?”

“Madam Yu had best teach that boy clearer boundaries,” Wang Lingjiao replied. “He harbors mutinous intent. I’ve already seized him and sent him to the proper authorities.”

Madam Yu arched her brows. “Mutinous intent?”

Jiang Cheng couldn’t help interrupt. “What mutinous intent could Liu-shidi harbor?”

"I've got proof," Wang Lingjiao declared. "Bring it here!"

A Wen sect disciple brought over a kite. Wang Lingjiao waved it. "This is the proof."

Wei Wuxian scoffed. "That kite's painted to look like your run-of-the-mill one-eyed monster. What kind of proof is that?"

Wang Lingjiao sneered in response. "Do you think I'm blind? Look closely." Her vibrantly red fingernails jabbed at the kite as she confidently delivered her analysis. "What color is this kite? Gold. What shape is this one-eyed monster? Round."

"And?" Madam Yu pressed.

"And?!" Wang Lingjiao exclaimed. "Madam Yu, have you not noticed yet? What does a round and golden object resemble? A sun!"

Amid the bug-eyed looks all around, she smugly continued.

"Of all the ways to design a kite, why must his be a one-eyed monster? Why must it be painted gold? Could he not make it a different shape? A different color? Are you all going to tell me this is a coincidence?! I think not! He's obviously doing it on purpose. Shooting a kite designed like this can mean only one thing: sun-shooting! He wants to shoot down the sun! This is grave disrespect toward the Wen Clan of Qishan! Is that not harboring mutinous intent?"

Seeing how clever she considered her little performance and forced logic to be, Jiang Cheng could hold back no longer. "Although the kite is gold and round, it's still far from looking like the sun! How are they similar? It looks nothing like it!"

"Based on your logic, we can't eat oranges either," Wei Wuxian added. "Aren't oranges gold and round too? But I think you've eaten them more than once."

Wang Lingjiao sent him a death glare.

Madam Yu asked frostily, "So you came here this time for the sake of a kite?"

"Of course not," Wang Lingjiao assured her. "I came this time to punish someone on behalf of the Wen Clan and Wen-gongzi."

Wei Wuxian’s heart stopped for a second. As he suspected, Wang Lingjiao pointed at him.

“While Wen-gongzi was bravely facing the Xuanwu of Slaughter on Mount Muxi, this boy took advantage of his distraction to make impertinent remarks and cause chaos, exhausting Wen-gongzi both physically and mentally. He nearly failed and even lost his sword!”

Listening to her spin false tales and fabricate lies, Jiang Cheng laughed out of sheer anger. On the other hand, Wei Wuxian remembered that Jiang Fengmian had left early that morning. *They purposely waited until this time to come, or they intentionally lured Jiang-shushu out!*

“But thank goodness!” Wang Lingjiao continued. “The heavens smile upon Wen-gongzi. Although he lost his sword, he still succeeded in slaying the Xuanwu of Slaughter, despite the danger. But that boy cannot be tolerated! I’ve come today bearing an order from Wen-gongzi—Madam Yu must punish this person and make an example of him for all of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng!”

“Mom…” Jiang Cheng pleaded.

“Quiet!” Madam Yu barked at him.

Wang Lingjiao was very pleased with Madam Yu’s reaction. “This Wei Ying… If my memory doesn’t fail me, he’s a servant of the Jiang Clan, correct? Sect Leader Jiang isn’t with us right now, but I’m certain Madam Yu understands the weight of things. If the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng shields him, it would really make one wonder…if certain rumors…could be true… hee hee.”

She sat there in the head seat where Jiang Fengmian always sat, giggling with a hand over her mouth. With a stormy face, Madam Yu shifted her gaze her way.

Jiang Cheng sensed what her words implied and exclaimed indignantly, “What rumors?!”

Wang Lingjiao giggled. “What rumors do you think? Just Sect Leader Jiang’s old love affair…”

Seeing this woman dare to invent lies about Jiang Fengmian to their faces, rage blazed up in Wei Wuxian. Angrily, he started, “You…”

Unexpected pain shot up his back, and his knees buckled. Madam Yu had suddenly moved and lashed him with her whip.

“Mom!” Jiang Cheng cried out.

Madam Yu had already risen to her feet. Zidian had been unleashed into its whip form, and its sizzling lightning coursed in her cold, jade-like hands. “Jiang Cheng, *move*! Otherwise you’ll kneel too!”

Wei Wuxian crawled up off the floor with difficulty. “Move, Jiang Cheng! Don’t worry about it!”

Madam Yu whipped again, lashing him back to the floor. She gritted her teeth. “…I’ve said again and again, for so long, that you…you unruly thing! One day, you’ll bring disaster on our Jiang Clan!”

Wei Wuxian shoved Jiang Cheng away. He took the lashings with gritted teeth, not moving and not speaking.

While Madam Yu always pelted him with hostile words, she’d never really hit him hard before—two or three lashes at most, or being made to kneel or confined indoors, and it never took Jiang Fengmian long to release him from that. But this time, he took dozens of hits from that whip, each lash so hard his back burned with pain until it went numb. It was hard, but he had to endure. If he wasn’t punished right now to Wang Lingjiao’s satisfaction—to the satisfaction of the Wen Clan of Qishan—then this whole mess wouldn’t end here!

Wang Lingjiao watched with a broad smile on her face. Once Madam Yu was done lashing, Zidian swiftly retracted, leaving Wei Wuxian kneeling on the floor. His upper body swayed forward, and he almost fell over. Jiang Cheng wanted to help him, but Madam Yu scolded him sharply.

“Stand aside. Do not help him.”

Jinzhu and Yinzhu firmly restrained Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian held on a while longer but then collapsed heavily to the ground, prone and unmoving.

Wang Lingjiao was astonished. “That’s it?”

Madam Yu humphed. “What do you think?”

“That’s all?” Wang Lingjiao prompted her again.

Madam Yu arched her brows. “What do you mean ‘that’s all’? What grade of weapon do you judge Zidian to be? He won’t recover from this lashing even in a month. He’ll feel it for some time.”

“But he’ll still recover!” Wang Lingjiao said.

Jiang Cheng demanded angrily, “What more do you want?!”

“Madam Yu, this is meant to be a punishment. He must remember this lesson forever, and regret his actions for the rest of his life, so he doesn’t commit the same wrongs again,” Wang Lingjiao lectured her. “If he only suffers a few lashes, he’ll be out and about again once he recuperates. What kind of punishment is that? Boys his age never remember the pain once their injuries heal. It doesn’t work at all.”

“What do you want, then?” Madam Yu demanded. “Chop off his legs to ensure he’s never out and about again?”

“Wen-gongzi is kind,” Wang Lingjiao assured, “He would never order something so brutal as chopping off both legs. Just his right arm—then Wen-gongzi will say no more about it.”

This woman was a donkey in a lion’s skin. Using Wen Chao as her backing, she was shamelessly out to avenge herself for the blow Wei Wuxian dealt her inside Mount Muxi’s underground cave!

Madam Yu glanced at Wei Wuxian askance. “Chop off his right arm?”

“That’s right,” Wang Lingjiao replied.

Yu Ziyuan rose to her feet and slowly paced around Wei Wuxian, seeming to be considering the idea. Wei Wuxian was in so much pain he could barely lift his head. Jiang Cheng struggled free of Jinzhu and Yinzhu, and fell to his knees to cover Wei Wuxian with his own body.

“Mom, mom, please don’t… Things weren’t at all like she said…”

Wang Lingjiao raised her voice. “Jiang-xiao-gongzi, are you accusing me of fabricking?”

Wei Wuxian lay prone on the ground, unable to even flip himself over. *“Fabricking”? What’s “fabricking”?* Then, it suddenly came to him. *You mean fabrication?! This woman used to be the handmaid of Wen Chao’s wife. She’s never been educated, and her vocabulary is limited. In going* *about feigning literacy, she used an unfamiliar word and mispronounced it while pretending to understand what she's babbling about!*

The current situation was dire, but in times like these, the human mind becomes unable to focus amidst the chaos and the imagination runs wild. So once the woman's gaffe clicked for Wei Wuxian, he found it quite funny.

Wang Lingjiao had no idea that she'd made a fool of herself. "Think carefully, Madam Yu. Our Wen Clan of Qishan will definitely follow up on this. Chop off his arm and let me bring it back with my report, and the Jiang Clang of Yunmeng will be perfectly fine. Otherwise, things won't go so well the next time Wen-gongzi asks questions!"

Madam Yu's eyes flashed with a chilling glint. "Jinzhu, Yinzhu, go. Close the door," she said darkly. "Don't let others see the blood."

Jinzhu and Yinzhu would never disobey a command from Madam Yu. They answered a brittle "yes!" in unison, then went to firmly shut the doors of the main hall.

When Wei Wuxian heard the doors close and saw the light on the ground vanish, fear surged to his head. *Is she really going to chop off my arm?*

Jiang Cheng was terrified. He hugged his mother's leg and begged her, "Mom? Mom! What are you doing? Please don't cut off his arm!"

After the fear passed, Wei Wuxian clenched his teeth and steadied his heart with painful resolve. …*That's fine! As long as I can trade it for peace at home… Take it for all I care. At worst I'll use my fuckin' left hand to practice the sword from now on!*

Wang Lingjiao clapped. "Madam Yu, I knew you would be the most loyal of subordinates to the Wen Clan of Qishan! Somebody, come hold this boy down!"

"No need for you to use your hands," Madam Yu said, and Jinzhu and Yinzhu walked over.

"Well, now. Are you having your two handmaids hold him down? That works too."

“Mom! Mom, listen to me!” Jiang Cheng cried. “Please, I beg you! Don’t chop off his arm! If Father finds out…”

It would’ve been better if he hadn’t mentioned Jiang Fengmian. The moment he did, Madam Yu’s face abruptly changed colors. “Do not mention your father in front of me! So what if he finds out? What’s he going to do, kill me?!”

Wang Lingjiao was delighted. “Oh, Madam Yu, I admire you so much! Looks like we’ll get along very well at the Overwatch Office from now on!”

Madam Yu yanked back the hem of her purple silk skirt as well as the leg Jiang Cheng was clinging to. She turned around and raised her brows. “The Overwatch Office?”

Wang Lingjiao grinned. “Yes, yes, the Overwatch Office! That’s the second important matter I came to Yunmeng for—the Wen Clan of Qishan’s new inspection order. We’ll be building an Overwatch Office in every city. I declare that from today onward, Lotus Pier is the Wen Clan’s Yunmeng Overwatch Office.”

No wonder she had been wandering around Lotus Pier earlier, making herself at home. She truly had claimed Lotus Pier as her new home in Yunmeng!

Jiang Cheng’s eyes were red. “What Overwatch Office?! This is my *home*!”

Wang Lingjiao furrowed her brows. “Madam Yu, you have to manage your son properly too. All other cultivation clans have been the Wen Clan’s subjects for centuries. How can he say things like ‘my home,’ ‘your home,’ in front of the Wen Clan’s envoy? I was hesitant at first, unsure if Lotus Pier could bear the responsibility of being the Overwatch Office—what with it being such an old place and all, and having produced a few rebels. But after I saw how well you obeyed my orders, not to mention how well your temper suits my taste, I’ve decided to give this honor…”

She hadn’t finished when Madam Yu slapped her soundly across the face.

Both the power of the slap and the noise it produced were earth-shattering. Wang Lingjiao was sent whirling around a few times from the force before she fell to the ground, her nose bleeding profusely and making a mess of the floor. Her pretty eyes were round and wide with shock.

There were a number of Wen sect disciples inside the main hall. Their faces changed color, and they all drew their swords. With a wave of Madam Yu's hand, Zidian shot forth. It slashed a half circle of blinding purple light and felled every target within range.

With poise and elegance, Madam Yu walked to Wang Lingjiao's side, looking down at her with palpable disdain. She leaned down and grabbed a handful of Wang Lingjiao's hair, hauling her head up to deliver another furious slap.

"How *dare* you! Lowly maid!"

Her tolerance had run dry. Her savage expression was inches from Wang Lingjiao's lopsided and swollen face, which was writ large with terror. Wang Lingjiao started shrieking horribly. Ignoring the noise, Madam Yu gave her another slap, which brought her ear-piercing screams to an abrupt halt.

"Before you beat a dog, check who its master is!" she bellowed. "You barge into my home and see fit to punish my people on my behalf?! Who are you to act so insolent here?!"

She heaved Wang Lingjiao's head aside and took out her handkerchief to wipe her hands, as if disgusted to have touched such filth. Jinzhu and Yinzhu stood behind their mistress, wearing the same mocking smile as her.

Wang Lingjiao's hands shook as she cupped her face. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she stammered threats. "You…you dare do this to me… The Wen Clan of Qishan and the Wang Clan of Yingchuan won't let you get away with this!"

Madam Yu tossed the handkerchief to the ground and kicked Wang Lingjiao back to the floor alongside it.

"Shut your mouth!" she ordered. "You lowly maid. My Yu Clan of Meishan is an esteemed family with centuries of history. Never have I heard of some 'Wang Clan of Yingchuan'! What vulgar hole did they crawl from? Are they all worthless like you? Hierarchy! I'll teach you what hierarchy is. *I* am superior, and *you* are inferior!"

To the side, Jiang Cheng was helping the prone Wei Wuxian to his feet. Both were completely dumbstruck at the scene that had just played out.

Madam Yu turned her head and signaled with her eyes. Jinzhu and Yinzhu understood immediately and drew their longswords. They circled the hall, moving swiftly and mercilessly to deliver a coup-de-grace to each of the dozen-some Wen disciples. Seeing that her own turn was coming up, Wang Lingjiao sputtered threats as she put up a last-ditch struggle.

“You… Do you think you can silence me?! You think Wen-gongzi doesn’t know where I am right now? You think he’ll let you off when he finds out?!”

Yinzhu sneered. “You say that as if he’s already let us off!”

“I’m close to Wen-gongzi, very close, I’m his woman!” Wang Lingjiao exclaimed. “If you dare lay your hands on me, he’ll—”

Madam Yu raised her hand and slapped her again.

“He’ll what?” she mocked. “Chop off our hands or our legs? Burn down our residence? Send people to raze Lotus Pier to the ground? Establish an Overwatch Office here?”

Jinzhu approached with sword in hand. Fear filled Wang Lingjiao’s eyes. She cowered and scrambled backward, kicking out her legs as she shrieked.

“Men! Help! Wen Zhuliu! Save me!”

Madam Yu’s expression hardened. She stomped her heel down hard on Wang Lingjiao’s wrist and drew her sword. Just as the blade was about to come slashing down, it was suddenly struck back with a *clang*.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng turned their heads to look. The doors to the hall blew thunderously open as a tall, strapping man broke through. He was dressed all in black and wore a sullen expression. It was Wen Chao’s personal bodyguard, the one with remarkable cultivation—Wen Zhuliu.

With her sword knocked out of her hand, Madam Yu held Zidian level with her chest. “Core-Melting Hand?”

Wen Zhuliu coldly returned the courtesy. “Purple Spider?”

Madam Yu’s foot was still firmly planted on Wang Lingjiao’s wrist. The latter’s face was contorted with pain, and tears and snot flowed freely as she wailed.

“Wen Zhuliu! Wen Zhuliu! Hurry up and save me!”

Madam Yu snorted. “Wen Zhuliu? Core-Melting Hand, isn’t your original name Zhao Zhuliu? Your surname clearly isn’t Wen, and yet you insist on changing it at any cost. Look at the lot of you, falling all over yourselves to do it. Is the Wen dogs’ name that valuable? Forgetting your roots and turning your back on your ancestry—how laughable!”

Unmoved, Wen Zhuliu replied stoically, “Each for his own master.”

They had only exchanged a few words, but already Wang Lingjiao had had enough and started shrieking again.

“*Wen Zhuliu!* Can’t you see the state I’m in right now?! Why are you still wasting time chitchatting with her instead of killing her?! Wen-gongzi told you to protect me, and this is how you do it?! You’d better watch it, or I’ll report you and there’ll be hell to pay!”

Madam Yu ground her heel into her wrist, and Wang Lingjiao screeched in pain and burst into more tears.

Wen Zhuliu wrinkled his brow. It was on Wen Ruohan’s orders that he protected Wen Chao, whose character he disliked to begin with. How could he have known that things would only get worse from there, with Wen Chao assigning him to protect Wang Lingjiao? The woman was pompous, boastful, and stupid, not to mention vicious, all of which incurred Wen Zhuliu’s displeasure. But unhappy as he was, he couldn’t defy Wen Ruohan and Wen Chao’s orders and crush her like an ant.

Fortunately, Wang Lingjiao detested Wen Zhuliu in equal measure and ordered him to only follow her from afar. He was not permitted to show himself before her unless she ordered him to—out of sight, out of mind. But the woman was now on the verge of losing her life, and Wen Chao would definitely fly off the handle and make him pay if he stood by and did nothing. And if Wen Chao wouldn’t let the matter drop, neither would Wen Ruohan.

“Pardon my offense,” Wen Zhuliu said.

“Nothing but posturing!” Madam Yu scoffed.

Zidian whirled toward Wen Zhuliu—who raised his large hand and seized it without the slightest concern!

In its whip form, Zidian coursed with currents of spiritual power. Its intensity and lethality were under the absolute control of its master, and Madam Yu had long burned to slaughter every last one of these Wen dogs. Furthermore, she was deeply apprehensive of Wen Zhuliu. The current of spiritual power that hurtled at him was thus deathly fierce—and yet, Wen Zhuliu seized it so effortlessly!

Zidian had never encountered such an opponent in all its years of existence. Seeing the whip be seized, Madam Yu stalled for a fleeting second, and Wang Lingjiao used this chance to scramble away. She fumbled a signal flare from her robes and shook it twice. A flash of fire shot forth from the tube with a sharp whistle and broke through the wooden window to explode in the sky. She fished out a second, then a third.

With her hair disheveled, she rambled, “Here…here… Come over here… All of you, come here!”

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Wei Wuxian gave Jiang Cheng a shove. “Don’t let her send off any more signals!”

Jiang Cheng let go of Wei Wuxian and rushed to chase after Wang Lingjiao. But Wen Zhuliu rushed Madam Yu in that moment, and it looked like his blow was going to land.

“Mom!” cried Jiang Cheng.

He immediately abandoned Wang Lingjiao and threw himself over. Wen Zhuliu didn’t even look back as he struck out with his palm.

“Not by a long shot!”

The blow hit Jiang Cheng’s shoulder, and blood burst from his mouth. The grayish-blue night sky was filled with resplendent light and shrill whistles—Wang Lingjiao had set off all the signal flares.

Seeing Jiang Cheng injured, Madam Yu howled with rage. In a split second, the light of Zidian’s spiritual power amplified enormously, flaring so bright it was dazzlingly white!

The sudden discharge from Zidian flung Wen Zhuliu hard against the wall. Jinzhu and Yinzhu each drew long whips sizzling with electricity and began to engage him in combat. The handmaids had been very close to Madam Yu ever since they were young, and trained under the same teacher, so their combined attacks were a force to be reckoned with.

Using the time this bought her, Madam Yu lifted the immobilized Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, one under each arm, and dashed out of the hall. There were still many sect disciples gathered in the drilling grounds.

Madam Yu barked, “Fall into formation and gear up!”

She rushed to the dock, carrying the two boys. There were always seven or eight small boats moored at Lotus Pier’s dock, which were used by the Jiang disciples to roam the lake and pick lotuses. Madam Yu tossed them onto a boat and jumped on as well, then grabbed Jiang Cheng’s hand to help him calm his qi. Since he was not severely injured, Jiang Cheng only coughed up a mouthful of blood.

“Mom, what should we do?” he asked.

“What do you mean ‘what should we do’?” Madam Yu replied. “Can’t you see? They came prepared. This battle was unavoidable. A horde of Wen dogs will descend at any moment. Leave now, both of you!”

“What about shijie?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Shijie went to Meishan the day before yesterday. If she comes back here…”

“Shut your mouth!” Madam Yu snapped at him. “This is all because of you, you little… This is all your fault!”

Wei Wuxian could only fall silent. Madam Yu removed Zidian’s silver ring from her right finger and slipped it onto the same finger on Jiang Cheng’s hand.

Stunned, Jiang Cheng asked, “…Mom, why are you giving me Zidian?”

“It’s yours now that I’ve given it to you!” Madam Yu replied. “Zidian has already acknowledged you as its master.”

Jiang Cheng looked lost. “Mom, aren’t you coming with us?”

Madam Yu gazed at his face. All of a sudden, she pulled him into a hug. She pressed a couple of kisses into his hair as she held him in her arms.

“My dear boy,” she murmured.

She hugged him so tight, it was as if she yearned to turn Jiang Cheng into a tiny baby once more and stuff him back into her belly, so no one could ever hurt him or tear them apart. Jiang Cheng had never been hugged by his mother like this before, let alone kissed in such a way. His head lay buried in her chest, his eyes wide in shock. He was at a complete loss as to how to react.

One arm hugging Jiang Cheng, Madam Yu seized Wei Wuxian by the collar with her free hand, looking like she wanted to choke him to death. “…You damn brat!” she hissed through clenched teeth. “Hateful! How absolutely hateful! Look what disaster you’ve brought on our family!”

Wei Wuxian’s chest heaved violently, and words failed him. This time, he was not forcing himself to endure in silence, or mentally grumbling retorts—he was truly rendered speechless.

Jiang Cheng anxiously asked again, “Mom, aren’t you coming with us?!”

Madam Yu released him at once and pushed him onto Wei Wuxian. She leapt onto the dock, and the little boat rocked from side to side on the lake from the action.

Jiang Cheng finally understood. Jinzhu, Yinzhu, the disciples, and the spiritual weapons and heirlooms that had been passed down through the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng for generations—they were all in Lotus Pier. There was no way to evacuate all or even any of them on such short notice. A fierce battle would no doubt break out very soon. As the mistress of the house, Madam Yu could not retreat, but she feared for her son. In an act of selfishness and desperation, she was forcing them to escape.

Knowing the extreme danger that waited after they parted, Jiang Cheng was stricken with panic. He stood up and attempted to follow her off the boat, but a current suddenly sparked from Zidian. It transformed into an electric cord that wrapped and bound them both securely on the boat, rendered completely immobile.

“Mom! What are you doing?!” Jiang Cheng cried out.

“Stop making a fuss,” Madam Yu said. “It will release its grip when you reach a safe place. Zidian will protect you if you encounter any danger along the way. Don’t come back. Head straight for Meishan and look for your sister!”

She then turned and pointed at Wei Wuxian, instructing him sharply, “Wei Ying! Heed me! Protect Jiang Cheng well. Even in death, you have to keep him safe. Do you understand?!”

“Madam Yu!” Wei Wuxian called out.

“Do you understand?!” Madam Yu raged. “Save me all your other nonsense. I’m only asking you one thing—*do you understand?!*”

Unable to break free of Zidian, Wei Wuxian could only give a heavy nod.

“Mom!” Jiang Cheng shouted. “Father isn’t back yet! Whatever happens, can’t we try to face it together?!”

At the mention of Jiang Fengmian, Madam Yu’s eyes seemed to redden for a moment. After a moment, she loudly cursed, “If he doesn’t come back, then so be it. Do you think I can’t manage without him?!”

She brandished her sword and cut the rope that tethered the boat to the dock, then gave the side of the boat a heavy kick. This kick, paired with the rapid currents of the river and strong wind, immediately sent the boat drifting out a dozen meters. It whirled around a few times before beginning to sail smoothly and swiftly down the center of the river.

Jiang Cheng let loose a heartbreaking wail. “Oh, *Mom*!”

He called for her dozens of times, but Madam Yu and Lotus Pier receded further and further into the distance. After the boat had drifted far away, Madam Yu walked back through the main gates of Lotus Pier with a flash of purple robes, longsword in hand.

Both Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian did all they could to struggle free. Zidian did not loosen an inch, even as it began to dig into their flesh from their attempts.

Jiang Cheng howled like a furious madman as he thrashed. “Why is it still not breaking?! Come on, break! *Break!*”

Wei Wuxian had just taken a dozen lashes from Zidian and was still in agony. He knew it was impossible to break free, that it was all in vain. Remembering that Jiang Cheng had sustained injuries as well, he endured the pain and tried to speak.

“Jiang Cheng, calm down. Madam Yu might not lose against Core-Melting Hand. Didn’t she beat Wen Zhuliu back earlier—”

“How can I calm down?! How?!” Jiang Cheng roared. “Even if she kills Wen Zhuliu, that bitch Wang Lingjiao already shot off all those signals! What if the Wen dogs see and send forces to besiege our home?!”

Wei Wuxian knew very well that it was impossible for him to calm down, but there had to be at least one clear head between the two of them. Just as he was about to continue talking, his eyes suddenly lit up.

“Jiang-shushu!” he shouted. “Jiang-shushu is back!”

Sure enough, another vessel on the river was sailing toward them.

Jiang Fengmian stood at the bow of the large boat, his robes flapping in the sailing wind as he gazed in Lotus Pier’s direction. There were over a dozen sect disciples milling on deck as well.

“Father! *Father!*” Jiang Cheng shouted.

Jiang Fengmian had seen them as well and appeared slightly shocked at the sight. One of the sect disciples took up the oar to approach.

Still in the dark about what had just transpired, Jiang Fengmian asked in astonishment, “A-Cheng? A-Ying? What happened to you two?”

The boys of Lotus Pier often played weird games. It was a common sight to see them pretending to be bloody corpses, sprawled face-down in the water. Jiang Fengmian, uncertain if they were in the middle of a new game, didn’t realize the gravity of the situation.

Jiang Cheng, however, was so happy he was driven to tears. With panicked urgency, he urged, “Father, Father, free us, quickly!”

“That is your mother’s Zidian, and Zidian knows who its masters are,” Jiang Fengmian said. “It probably won’t allow me to…”

He reached out to Zidian as he spoke and had only just touched it when it unexpectedly retracted itself obediently. It instantly transformed into a ring and coiled around one of his fingers. Jiang Fengmian promptly froze at the sight.

Zidian was a top-grade spiritual weapon that belonged to Yu Ziyuan, and her will was its first and foremost command. It could acknowledge multiple masters, but in an order of hierarchy, and Madam Yu was undoubtedly its undisputed primary master. She had commanded it to bind Jiang Cheng until he was safe, which was why Jiang Cheng could not break free even though he was also one of its recognized masters.

It appeared Jiang Fengmian had been recognized as Zidian's secondary master, though there was no telling when that had happened. It had judged them safe in his presence and therefore loosened the binding. However, Madam Yu had never mentioned that she'd instructed Zidian to acknowledge Jiang Fengmian as a master.

Finally separated, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian threw themselves apart and collapsed.

"What is going on?" Jiang Fengmian questioned. "Why were you two sitting in a boat, bound by Zidian?"

Jiang Cheng clutched onto him as though he were a lifeline. "Today the Wens came to our home. Mom got into a dispute with them and started fighting with Core-Melting Hand! I'm scared she'll be outnumbered; someone set off signal flares, so there might be even more enemies on the way. Father, let's hurry back together to help her! Let's go now!"

The sect disciples all appeared shocked to hear this.

"Core-Melting Hand?!" Jiang Fengmian repeated.

Jiang Cheng confirmed, "That's right, Father! We…"

Before he could finish, there was a flash of purple light and Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian were once again bound. Both of them fell back into the boat in the same position as before.

Jiang Cheng was stunned. "…Father?!"

"I will go back," Jiang Fengmian said. "You two will leave. Do not look back and do not return to Lotus Pier. Once ashore, immediately find a way to head for Meishan to look for your sister and grandmother."

"Jiang-shushu!" Wei Wuxian cried out.

Once the shock passed, Jiang Cheng frantically kicked at the side of the boat, sending it rocking incessantly. “Father, release me! Let me go!”

“I will go back to find San-Niangzi,” Jiang Fengmian stated.

Jiang Cheng glared at him. “Can’t we go back to find her together?!”

Jiang Fengmian gazed steadily at him. He suddenly reached out. His hand paused in midair for a moment before slowly stroking Jiang Cheng’s head.

“A-Cheng. Be well.”

“Jiang-shushu,” Wei Wuxian pleaded. “He’ll never be okay if anything happens to you.”

Jiang Fengmian shifted his gaze over to Wei Wuxian. “A-Ying… Look after A-Cheng.”

He returned once more to his large vessel. Both boats brushed past each other, then drifted further and further apart.

Jiang Cheng screamed in despair.

“*Dad!*”

— Part 2 —

THE LITTLE BOAT FLOWED DOWNSTREAM with the current. It was some time before Zidian loosened its grip and transformed back into a silver ring on Jiang Cheng’s hand.

Having yelled the entire way, their voices had long since gone hoarse. They said not a word after being released from the binding but immediately began to sail back to where they’d come from. They had no oars, so they paddled with their hands against the current.

Madam Yu had said he wouldn’t recover from the lashes he’d taken for at least a month. But in that moment, Wei Wuxian felt like his ability to move was barely affected at all. He could push past the searing, stinging pain in the areas where the lash had hit.

With a burst of energy only felt by those on the brink of death, they paddled desperately. Finally—more than two hours later, paddling their boat with nothing but their bare hands—they made it back to Lotus Pier.

It was already deep into the night.

The main gates of Lotus Pier were tightly shut, and the area outside was bright with lights. Fragments of moonlight shimmered on the crystalline waters, where dozens of large, colored lanterns shaped like nine-petal lotuses floated quietly by the dock.

Everything was the same as it had been, and that was precisely what magnified their unease to the point of agony.

The two paddled in and stopped when they reached the center of the lake. Their hearts pounded wildly while they sat there in the water. They didn’t dare approach the dock, nor did they dare rush ashore to check on the situation inside. Jiang Cheng’s eyes welled with hot tears, and his arms and legs were shaking.

After a long while, Wei Wuxian said, “…Let’s not enter from the front gates.”

Jiang Cheng managed an unsteady nod. Both of them soundlessly paddled the boat to the other side of the lake. There was an old willow tree rooted on the bank, with a thick, sturdy trunk that slanted over the water and branches that trailed onto its surface. The boys of Lotus Pier would often walk along the trunk of this particular willow tree to sit and fish from the treetop.

The two stopped the boat behind the weeping trails of the old willow and headed ashore under the cover of the night and the willow's branches. Wei Wuxian, who was used to climbing over walls, tugged at Jiang Cheng.

"This way," he whispered.

Jiang Cheng was overwhelmed with terror and alarm. He could barely keep his bearings as he followed Wei Wuxian and pressed close to the wall, creeping low for a moment before silently scaling it. There was a row of sculptures in the shape of beast heads lining the top of the wall, which made it a suitable spot for spying.

In the past, they were always the ones being peeked at by people who'd sneakily scaled the walls. But now, they were the ones peeking in.

Wei Wuxian craned his neck to look. Immediately, his heart sank.

Rows and rows of people stood in Lotus Pier's drilling grounds, all wearing blazing sun uniforms with flames embroidered on their collars, lapels, and sleeves. The flames were a glaring, blood-like shade of red.

In contrast to those standing, there were also many sprawling and prone. The fallen ones had already been moved to the northwest corner of the drilling grounds, all piled together in a haphazard heap. One person stood with his back to Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng. His head was lowered, as if he was inspecting the pile of Jiang disciples. Whether those people were alive or dead, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng couldn't tell.

Jiang Cheng was still frantically searching for the figures of Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian, but Wei Wuxian instantly teared up.

He saw a number of familiar faces in that pile of disciples.

His throat was dry and painful. His temples felt as if they had been slammed with hammers, and he felt cold all over. He didn't dare think about Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan.

Just as he was about to take a closer look to determine whether the skinny boy sprawled at the very top really was Liu-shidi, the person standing at the northwest corner turned around, seeming to sense something.

Wei Wuxian immediately pressed Jiang Cheng’s head down and lowered his own. Although he ducked in time, he still got a clear look at the person’s face.

It was a young man, about the same age as them. He was tall and thin, with fine, delicate features. His jet-black eyes were a stark contrast to his ghastly pale skin. Although he was wearing a blazing sun uniform, he did not have an imposing aura about him—if anything, he looked a little too refined and gentle. The particular sun patterning on his robes marked his official rank as one of the Wen Clan’s young masters.

Wei Wuxian’s heart jumped into his throat. *Were we spotted? Should we make a break for it, or are we still in the clear?*

Just then, the sound of delicate weeping rose from within the enclosing wall. Amid the sound of footsteps, a man comforted in a gentle voice, “Stop crying; your face is all stained.”

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were both very well acquainted with this voice—it was Wen Chao!

Wang Lingjiao’s simpering soon followed. “Will you not like me anymore if my face is all stained?”

“How could that be?” Wen Chao coaxed. “I’ll like Jiaojiao no matter what Jiaojiao looks like.”

Wang Lingjiao had worked herself up into quite a state. “I was really so, so scared… Today I really…thought that bitch would kill me and I’d never see you again…Wen-gongzi… I…”

Wen Chao seemed to have hugged her. “Stop obsessing over it, Jiaojiao. Everything’s over now. Fortunately, Wen Zhuliu protected you.”

“Don’t bring him up!” Wang Lingjiao whined angrily. “That Wen Zhuliu, I hate him! If he hadn’t come so late, I wouldn’t have suffered so much. My face still hurts so, so much, oww…”

She was clearly the one who had previously dismissed Wen Zhuliu, ordering him to stay out of her sight. Getting beaten was her own doing, but she was once again twisting the narrative.

Wen Chao loved seeing her play the aggrieved coquette. “No, no ‘oww.’ Here, lemme rub… It’s fine if you don’t like him, but you mustn’t test his patience. That guy’s got remarkable cultivation. My father has said many times that he’s a rare talent, so I’m hoping I can still use him for a few more years.”

Wang Lingjiao still refused to concede. “Talent…so what? Sect Leader Wen has so many renowned cultivators and so many talents under his command! Thousands of them! Don’t tell me he can’t do without him in that count!”

She was hinting that Wen Chao should punish Wen Zhuliu to appease her anger. Wen Chao chuckled. He might dote on Wang Lingjiao but not enough so to punish his own bodyguard for a woman’s sake. After all, Wen Zhuliu had thwarted countless assassination attempts on him. Furthermore, he was a tight-lipped man of few words and would never betray his father, which meant he would never betray Wen Chao either. Such a loyal and powerful bodyguard was a rarity.

Sensing that he was dismissing her whining, Wang Lingjiao added, “Look at him. He’s a nobody, just your subordinate, and yet so arrogant. He wouldn’t even let me slap that Yu bitch earlier. She was already dead. Just a corpse! He looks down on me. Doesn’t that mean he looks down on you too?”

Jiang Cheng lost his grip and slid down the wall. Wei Wuxian deftly grabbed him by the back of his collar and stopped his descent. Hot tears brimmed in their eyes. The drops rolled down their cheeks, splashed onto the back of their hands, onto the ground.

Wei Wuxian recalled how Jiang Fengmian had fought with Madam Yu before he went out this morning. The last words that had passed between them had not been gentle or pleasant. He wondered if they’d managed to see each other one last time, and if Jiang Fengmian had a chance to say even one word more to Madam Yu.

Wen Chao was completely unconcerned. “That’s just him being eccentric. Talking about how ‘an honorable personmaybe killed but not humiliated’—*he’s* the one who did all the killing, so what’s the point of spouting that scholarly stuff?”

“Exactly!” Wang Lingjiao agreed. “What a hypocrite!”

Wen Chao, who loved to hear her agree with him, laughed happily.

“That bitch deserved it,” Wang Lingjiao gloated again. “She used her family’s power and influence to force that man to marry her, and look how that turned out! What good did marriage do? He still didn’t like her. Everyone laughed at the forsaken wife behind her back for ten years, and she still didn’t take the hint. Rather than take it down a notch, she just kept on being arrogant and domineering. She deserved an end like this.”

“Really?” Wen Chao wondered. “The woman was quite attractive. Why didn’t Jiang Fengmian like her?”

In his worldview, there was no reason for a man not to like a woman as long as she was good-looking. The women who should be spurned were the ones who were plain, or who would not sleep with him.

“It’s obvious if you think about it,” Wang Lingjiao explained. “The bitch was so aggressive. She’s clearly a woman, yet she went around waving that whip of hers all day and slapping people’s faces. So ill-bred. Jiang Fengmian really had the worst luck, to marry a woman like that and be dragged down by her.”

“Indeed!” Wen Chao chimed in. “Women, I say, should be like my Jiaojiao: lovable and obedient, gentle and adorable, and wholeheartedly on my side.”

Wang Lingjiao giggled.

Listening to these revolting, uncouth vulgarities, Wei Wuxian shook with both grief and anger. He was worried that Jiang Cheng would go berserk, but he was stiff as a stone, as if he’d passed out from the sheer weight of his despair.

Wang Lingjiao muttered under her breath, “Of course I only side with you… Who else would I side with?”

Just then, another voice interjected. “Wen-gongzi! Every building has been searched. The count of spiritual weapons is over two thousand four hundred. They are currently being sorted.”

That was the property of Lotus Pier, the belongings of the Jiang family!

Wen Chao laughed heartily. “Great, fantastic! Times like these call for a grand celebration. Let’s have a feast here tonight! Make the best use of everything!”

“Congratulations to gongzi for becoming the master of Lotus Pier,” Wang Lingjiao simpered.

“What ‘Lotus Pier’? Change the name,” Wen Chao said. “Tear down all the doors with that nine-petal lotus insignia and have them replaced with the Wen Clan of Qishan’s sun. Jiaojiao, c’mere and perform your best song and dance for me!”

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng could not bring themselves to continue listening. They hopped off the wall, hobbling and stumbling away from Lotus Pier, but even after running a long way, they couldn’t shake off the merry chatter of the crowd at the drilling ground. A woman’s coquettish singing voice wafted cheerfully over Lotus Pier, like a poisoned blade slicing their ears and hearts again and again.

They had run thousands of meters in one breath when Jiang Cheng abruptly came to a halt. Wei Wuxian did the same. Jiang Cheng turned back, and Wei Wuxian grabbed him.

“Jiang Cheng, what are you doing?! Don’t go back!”

Jiang Cheng shook off his hand. “Don’t go back? What’re you saying? You’re telling me not to go back? My parents’ bodies are still in Lotus Pier. Am I to simply leave them there? Where else can I go, if not back?!”

Wei Wuxian tightened his grip on him. “What can you do if you go back? They killed Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu. It’s certain death for you if you go back!”

“Then so be it!” Jiang Cheng screamed at him. “Go fuck off if you’re scared to die, but don’t block my way!”

Wei Wuxian moved to tackle him. “It’s never too late to take revenge! Their bodies must be retrieved, but not right now!”

Jiang Cheng dodged aside and counterattacked. “If not now, then when? I’ve had enough of you. *Fuck off!*”

“Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu told me to look after you,” Wei Wuxian shouted furiously. “They want you to be well!”

“Shut up!” Jiang Cheng roared angrily. He shoved him hard. *“Why?!”*

Wei Wuxian tumbled into the grass and Jiang Cheng pounced on him. He lifted Wei Wuxian by the collar and shook him incessantly.

“Why?! *Why?! Why?!* Are you happy now?! Are you satisfied?!” Jiang Cheng’s eyes were bloodshot as he closed his hands on Wei Wuxian’s neck and began to squeeze. “Why did you have to save Lan Wangji?!”

Overcome by grief and rage, Jiang Cheng had lost his mind and couldn’t control his strength. Wei Wuxian tried to pry off his wrists. “Jiang Cheng…”

Jiang Cheng pinned him to the ground and snarled at him.

“Why did you have to save Lan Wangji?! Why did you have to meddle when you could’ve stayed out of it?! How many times have I told you not to stir up trouble?! Not to fight?! Do you like playing the hero so much?! Do you see what happens when you play hero?! Huh?! Are you happy now!?

“If Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, and the rest die, then so be it! Let them die! What does it matter to us if they die?! What has it got to do with our family?! So why?! Why?!

“Go die, go and die, all of you, go and die! *Die!*”

Wei Wuxian’s face was red from suffocation. *“Jiang Cheng!”*

The hands strangling him suddenly loosened their grip.

Jiang Cheng leveled a glare at him, tears tumbling down his cheeks. From deep within his throat escaped the sorrowful, anguished moan of one near death.

“…I want my parents. My mom and dad…” he wept.

He asked Wei Wuxian for his father and his mother, but it didn’t matter who he asked. They would never return to him again.

Wei Wuxian wept as well. The two slumped back on the grass and watched each other cry bitter tears.

Deep down, Jiang Cheng knew very well that even if Wei Wuxian had not saved Lan Wangji in the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave at Mount Muxi, the Wens would have found a reason to come knocking sooner or later. But he couldn’t help but think that had it not been for Wei Wuxian, perhaps it wouldn’t have happened so soon. Perhaps there would’ve still been time to salvage the situation.

That “perhaps” was agonizing. With no outlet to vent them, his remorse and fury consumed him and tore him apart with grief.

When day broke, Jiang Cheng was almost lifeless.

He had somehow managed to sleep a bit that night, primarily because he was so exhausted from weeping that he involuntarily passed out. The secondary reason was his delirious hope that this was all just a nightmare. He desperately hoped to open his eyes and find himself lying in his own room in Lotus Pier. His father would be there, sitting in the hall reading as he polished his sword. His mother would be there, losing her temper and grumbling as she scolded Wei Wuxian for winking and pulling funny faces. His older sister would be crouched in the kitchen, dazed and racking her brain for what to cook today. His fellow shidi would be there, shirking their morning lessons and bouncing around…

He did not wake up to any of these scenes. Instead, after being exposed to the cold wind all night, he awoke with a splitting headache and found himself curled up in the overgrown grass behind a desolate and remote hillside.

Wei Wuxian was the first to move. With some difficulty, he pushed himself up, hands on his thighs. “Let’s go,” he said in a hoarse voice.

Jiang Cheng remained motionless.

Wei Wuxian tried again. He reached out to pull him up. “Let’s go.”

“…Go where?” Jiang Cheng asked, his voice dry and raw.

“To the Yu Clan at Meishan. To look for shijie.”

Jiang Cheng waved away his outstretched hand. After a moment, he pushed himself up and slowly stood. Both set off in the direction of Meishan, traveling on foot.

Along the way, they both forced themselves to keep their spirits up. Their gaits were heavy, as if they carried a mighty burden on their shoulders.

Jiang Cheng kept his head lowered the entire way. He kept his right arm pressed close to his heart, stroking the ring on his index finger—Zidian, the only remaining memento of his loved ones. He kept looking back in the direction of Lotus Pier; staring back at what had once been his home but was now reduced to a nest of devils. Again and again, he looked back, as if he would never tire of looking, as if he would always harbor a tiny bit of hope. All the while, tears poured ceaselessly from his eyes.

They had fled in a hurry and brought no rations with them. After walking for half a day, they started to feel dizzy. It was clear they had overexerted themselves, and so they left the desolate wilderness and entered a small city.

Wei Wuxian glanced at Jiang Cheng, seeing his utter exhaustion and reluctance to keep moving around. “Go sit down. I’ll go find us some food.”

Jiang Cheng didn’t say a word, nor did he nod. All throughout their trek that day, he’d only said a few words total to Wei Wuxian.

Before walking away, Wei Wuxian repeatedly exhorted him to sit still and not to move. At least they weren’t too short of money—he had a habit of hiding small change in various corners of his clothes, which came in handy now. He walked around and bought food and dry rations to prepare for the long journey ahead. It took him less than an incense time to grab everything, after which he immediately returned to the spot where they’d separated.

But Jiang Cheng was gone.

Wei Wuxian, carrying an armful of steamed buns, biscuits, and fruit, panicked for a moment before he forced himself to keep calm and search the nearby streets. When he still didn’t see Jiang Cheng—that was when he truly panicked. He grabbed a nearby cobbler.

“Sir, there was a young master about my age sitting here earlier. Did you see where he went?”

The cobbler spoke around the thick thread between his pursed lips. “The one with you earlier?”

“Yeah!” Wei Wuxian replied.

“I didn’t get a good look, since I’ve got work to attend to, but he was staring at the people walking by. The next time I looked up, he was suddenly gone. I suppose he left.”

Wei Wuxian mumbled, “…Left… He left…”

He must have gone back to Lotus Pier to steal the bodies!

Like a man gone mad, Wei Wuxian took to his heels and sprinted back in the direction they’d come from.

The weight of the food he’d bought slowed him down, and after running for a while, he abandoned it. But he was dizzy and exhausted, and his panic aggravated his physical distress. His knees buckled, and he fell smack on his face into the dirt, tasting soil.

An overwhelming sense of powerlessness and hatred welled up in Wei Wuxian’s heart. He smashed his fist hard into the ground and screamed. Only then did he climb to his feet. He turned back to pick up the steamed buns he had thrown to the ground earlier, wiped them on his chest and wolfed them all down in only a few bites. He chewed like he was tearing at flesh. As he gulped them down, they caught in his throat, and he coughed, chest aching. Then he picked up a few more and stuffed them into the folds of his robes, keeping one in hand and continuing to eat it as he continued his mad dash in hopes of intercepting Jiang Cheng.

He arrived at Lotus Pier with the bright moon and a smattering of stars overhead. Not once had he caught sight of Jiang Cheng.

Hands on his knees as he gasped for breath, Wei Wuxian gazed at the brightly illuminated Lotus Pier from afar. Blood climbed up his chest and into his throat, a common side effect of running for a long time. The metallic taste saturated his mouth, and his vision was turning spotty.

Why didn’t I catch up with Jiang Cheng? Wei Wuxian thought. *Even after I got some food in me, I can only run so fast. He was even more exhausted than me and had been dealt a harder blow. Don’t tell me he can run faster than me under such circumstances… Did he really return to*

Lotus Pier? But if not, where else could he have gone? To Meishan alone, without me?

After taking a moment to catch his breath and regain his wits, he still decided to head into Lotus Pier to confirm. As he stealthily crept along a segment of wall, a voice in Wei Wuxian's heart prayed despairingly, *Please, don't let there be someone on the drilling ground talking about Jiang Cheng's body this time. Or else…or else, I'll…*

Or else, what?

What else could he do?

Nothing. He was powerless. Lotus Pier was destroyed, Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu were gone, and now Jiang Cheng was missing too. He was all alone. He didn't even have a sword. He knew nothing. He could do nothing!

For the first time, he realized just how insignificant his own power was. In the face of a behemoth like the Wen Clan of Qishan, he was like a mantis trying to stop a chariot—ambitious and oblivious to his own pitiable limitations.

Wei Wuxian's eyes grew hot as the tears started to well again. As he turned a corner, someone wearing a blazing sun uniform walked toward him.

In a flash, Wei Wuxian took them captive.

He trapped the person's wrists with his left hand and grasped their neck with his right. In a hushed voice, he threatened with the most malevolent tone he could muster, "Don't make a noise, or I'll break your neck!"

The person was completely at his mercy. "Wei, Wei-gongzi, it's me," they hurriedly said. "It's me!"

It was the voice of a young man. Wei Wuxian's first reaction to it was to think, *Could it be someone I know, going undercover by wearing the Wen Clan uniform?* But this voice was completely unfamiliar to him. He immediately dismissed the thought and tightened his grip.

"Don't try anything funny!"

"I…I'm not. Wei-gongzi, you, you can take a look at my face."

Look at his face? Don’t tell me he has something hidden in his mouth that he’s going to spit at me?

Wei Wuxian was on guard as he warily turned the young man’s face to take a look. He had delicate and handsome features, with an air of youthful naivete. He was the young master of the Wen Clan of Qishan whom they had seen while spying yesterday.

Don’t know him, Wei Wuxian thought apathetically. He turned the youth’s face back and continued to throttle him. Keeping his voice down, he hissed, “Who are you?!”

The young man seemed a little disappointed. “I…I’m Wen Ning.”

Wei Wuxian frowned. “Who’s that?”

Inwardly, he was thinking, *Who cares who he is? Either way, he has status in the clan. With him in hand, I might be able to exchange him for Jiang Cheng!*

Wen Ning spoke slowly and falteringly. “I… A couple years ago, during Qishan’s Grand Symposium, I…I…shot arrows…”

Wei Wuxian burned with frustration at his hemming and hawing. He raged, “You, you, you what?! You got a stutter?!”

Wen Ning flinched in fright in Wei Wuxian’s grip, looking as if he wanted to curl into a ball and clutch at his own head to protect it. Softly, he answered, “Yeah…yeah.”

Wei Wuxian had no response to that. “…”

Looking at this sad, timid little stuttering figure, a vague memory suddenly returned to him. *The Qishan Grand Symposium, the year before last… Grand Symposium… Shooting arrows…oh! There* was *someone!*

Wei Wuxian ventured a guess. “You’re that…Wen…Wen something. The one who was pretty good at archery?”

Wen Ning nodded vigorously. “That, that’s me!” he replied in delight. “Yesterday…I saw you, Wei-gongzi, and Jiang-gongzi, and I thought you might come back…”

“You saw me yesterday?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Y-yes,” Wen Ning answered.

"But you didn't tell anyone?" Wei Wuxian pressed.

"I would never!" Wen Ning exclaimed. "I would never tell anyone!"

It was a rare stutter-free statement. His tone was firm and resolute, as if he were swearing an oath. But Wei Wuxian still wavered, uncertain.

Wen Ning continued, "Wei-gongzi, you're here to find Jiang-gongzi, aren't you?"

"Is Jiang Cheng inside?!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed.

Wen Ning gave an honest answer. "Yes…" Wen Ning answered honestly.

Wei Wuxian's mind whirled as fast as lightning when he heard this. *Jiang Cheng is inside, so I'll have to enter Lotus Pier. Should I take Wen Ning hostage? No use in that. Wen Chao probably doesn't like him, so it's completely pointless to hold him hostage! And is he lying or not? Isn't he a member of the Wen Clan? But he really didn't sound the alarm when he saw us yesterday. If I release him, will he betray me? Can someone so kindhearted really exist among the Wen dogs? If I want to be absolutely sure nothing goes wrong, my only option is…*

The intent to kill flashed through Wei Wuxian's mind.

He had never been one particularly given to killing. But ever since the tragedy that befell his family, wrath and fury had been smoldering within him. Mercy or benevolence had no place in a situation as grave as this. By applying just a bit of force to his right hand, he could break Wen Ning's neck!

As Wei Wuxian's thoughts swirled, Wen Ning asked, "Wei-gongzi, have you returned to save Jiang-gongzi?"

Wei Wuxian's fingers curled. "What do you think?" he retorted frostily.

Surprisingly, Wen Ning smiled, though he did so nervously. "I knew it. I…I can help you save him."

For a second, Wei Wuxian thought he'd misheard. Astonished, he blurted, "…You? You'll help me save him?!"

“Yes. R-right now,” Wen Ning said. “I can bring him out right now. Wen Chao and the rest have gone out!”

Wei Wuxian gripped him. “Can you really?!”

“Yes!” Wen Ning assured. “I, I’m considered a junior of the Wen Clan. There’s a group of sect disciples under my command who will heed my orders.”

“Heed your orders?” Wei Wuxian snapped. “To kill people?”

“N-n-no!” Wen Ning hurriedly explained himself, “The sect disciples under me would never kill people at random! I’ve never killed anyone from the Jiang Clan either. I only hurried here after I heard what happened at Lotus Pier. Really!”

Wei Wuxian stared at him. *What is he up to? Is he lying? Or just feigning civility? This is ridiculous; does he think me a fool?!*

The frightening thing, however, was that he was honestly beside himself with joy at having found a lifeline.

He harshly cursed himself—foolish, useless, absurd, outrageous, fanciful. However, he was just one person with no sword or spiritual weapons, and there were hundreds and thousands of cultivators from the Wen Clan stationed here. And possibly Wen Zhuliu as well.

He wasn’t afraid to die—only afraid that he couldn’t save Jiang Cheng before he did. He was afraid he’d end up letting down Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu, who’d entrusted Jiang Cheng to him. With things being what they were, the only one he could pin his hopes on was this Wen he’d met a grand total of three times!

Wei Wuxian licked his parched lips and said, his voice rough, “Then…can you…can you help me…help me retrieve Sect Leader Jiang and Madam’s Yu’s bodies…”

Without realizing it, he had also begun to stammer. He was midway through his sentence when he realized he was still gripping Wen Ning threateningly and hastily released the young man. He had a contingency plan, however—if Wen Ning fled and yelled the moment he released him, Wei Wuxian was ready to immediately split his head open.

However, Wen Ning turned around and said in all seriousness, “I’ll… I’ll definitely do my best.”

His mind in a muddle, Wei Wuxian waited. As he paced in circles, he thought, *What’s wrong with me? Have I gone mad? Why is Wen Ning helping me? And why should I trust him? What if he’s lied to me and Jiang Cheng isn’t inside at all? No—it’s best if he* isn’t *inside!*

Before an incense time had passed, Wen Ning re-emerged soundlessly with someone on his back. The person was covered in blood and motionless, their face ghastly pale, and their eyes shut tight. It was none other than Jiang Cheng.

Wei Wuxian softly called out, “Jiang Cheng?! Jiang Cheng?!”

He held a hand under Jiang Cheng’s nose—still breathing.

Wen Ning extended a hand to Wei Wuxian and placed something in his palm. “Jiang, Jiang-gongzi’s Zidian. I’ve brought that too.”

Recalling that he had harbored the intent to kill Wen Ning earlier, Wei Wuxian didn’t know what else he could say. “…Thank you!” he mumbled.

“You’re welcome…” Wei Ning replied. “As for Jiang-xiansheng and Madam Yu’s bodies, I’ve already had them moved and will transport them to you later. It, it’s inadvisable to stay for too long. You should go now…”

Without needing him to say another word, Wei Wuxian took Jiang Cheng and lifted him onto his own back. The first thing he noticed was the bloody whip wound across Jiang Cheng’s chest.

“The discipline whip?!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed.

“Yes,” Wen Ning confirmed. “Wen Chao got his hands on the Jiang Clan’s discipline whip… Jiang-gongzi has other injuries as well.”

Wei Wuxian felt around on Jiang Cheng. He had at least three broken ribs, and who knew what else that couldn’t yet be seen.

“When Wen Chao returns and realizes what happened, he will definitely hunt for both of you around Yunmeng…” Wen Ning added. “Wei-gongzi, if you trust me, I can show you a good place to hide.”

Jiang Cheng was seriously injured and in urgent need of treatment and rest. They definitely couldn’t be on the move and missing meals as they had been before. Wei Wuxian saw no other way out of this impossible predicament than relying on Wen Ning.

Just a day ago, he would never have dreamed he and Jiang Cheng would have to rely on a Wen’s help to escape. He might even have died rather than submit.

But now, Wei Wuxian could only say, “Thank you!”

Wen Ning waved his hands. “No…no need for thanks. Wei-gongzi, this way. I-I have a boat…”

Carrying Jiang Cheng on his back, Wei Wuxian found the boat Wen Ning had hidden and placed Jiang Cheng in the cabin. Wen Ning cleaned Jiang Cheng’s wounds before applying medicinal powder and bandaging them. Seeing him move with such practiced skill, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but recall how the young man had looked back when he’d seen him at the Qishan Grand Symposium.

It was the same symposium where he’d scored in the top four for archery alongside Lan Wangji, Lan Xichen, and Jin Zixuan. Before the archery competition had started that day, he’d been wandering around Nightless City by himself. As he walked, he’d passed through a small garden and suddenly heard the reverberations of a bowstring.

Wei Wuxian had entered the garden through the trees, brushing aside the leaves as he crept along. He’d seen a young man in lightweight white robes standing there, aiming his bow at a target in front of him right before he released the string.

The young man’s side profile was delicate and refined, and his posture as he drew the bow was both beautiful and perfectly correct. The target’s red-painted center was densely packed with arrows, and his latest shot had joined the crowd there as well.

To think he had not missed a single shot!

“That’s some sharp shooting!” Wei Wuxian cheered.

Seeing his shot had flown true, the young man pulled another arrow from the quiver on his back. He had his head down, about to nock the arrow, when he unexpectedly heard Wei Wuxian’s unfamiliar voice. Startled, his hand shuddered and the arrow fell to the ground.

Wei Wuxian walked out from behind the flowerbed with a smile. “Which of the Wen Clan’s young masters are you? That was marvelous. Beautiful. Great shooting there. I’ve never seen anyone from your clan who could shoot…”

Before he could finish, the young man abandoned his bow and arrows and fled from sight.

Wei Wuxian was struck momentarily speechless. Then he stroked his chin. *Am I that dashing? So dashing I scared him away?*

He didn’t take the incident to heart, dismissing it as a curious sighting. The competition was about to start, so he returned to the square. There was a commotion on the Wen Clan’s side.

Wei Wuxian asked Jiang Cheng, “How can their clan stir up so much trouble organizing a symposium? There’s drama every day. What’s the matter now?”

“What else?” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “The number of competition spots is limited. They’re all fighting over who gets to participate.” After a pause, he continued contemptuously, “That group of Wens are all equally terrible archers. It’s going to be like that no matter who participates. Why would fighting over it make any difference?”

From the other end of the square, Wen Chao barked, “One more! One more, we’re still one short! Last spot!”

The young man in white from before was also standing among the Wen Clan crowd. He looked left and right, then mustered up enough courage to lift his hand. But he didn’t hold it up high enough, and he didn’t dare to shout out his own name as the others did. It was only after he’d been shoved around for a while that someone noticed him and marveled aloud.

“Qionglin? You want to participate too?”

That young man named Qionglin nodded. Someone else laughed.

“I’ve never even seen you hold a bow before. What are you doing trying to participate in the competition?! Don’t waste the spot.”

Wen Qionglin seemed to want to defend himself, but that person continued, “All right, enough. Don’t try to sign up just for the novelty of it. The results are going to be officially counted. It won’t be my business if you go and humiliate yourself.”

Wei Wuxian thought, *Humiliate? If there’s anyone in the Wen Clan who can save the lot of you any face, it’s him.*

The disdain in the person’s tone came too easily, and it incurred Wei Wuxian’s displeasure to hear. He raised his voice. “Who said he’s never held a bow before? He has, and he’s very good at it!”

The crowd looked at him with slight surprise, then turned their eyes to the young man. Wen Qionglin’s face was somewhat pale to begin with, and suddenly having everyone’s attention on him turned it beet-red in no time. His pitch-black eyes stared hard at Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian walked over, hands clasped behind his back. “Weren’t you doing a pretty good job of it earlier in the garden?”

Wen Chao turned around and wondered dubiously, “Really? You’re good at archery? Why did I never hear about this?”

Wen Qionglin mumbled quietly, “…I…I only just started training recently…”

His voice was soft and also halting, as if he was preparing for someone to cut him off any time, which indeed happened often. Wen Chao impatiently interrupted him.

“All right then, there’s a target there. Go ahead and show us. If you’re good, you’re in. If not, get out of the way.”

The area around Wen Qionglin was vacated in no time. His grip on the bow tightened as he looked pleadingly left and right. Seeing how lacking he was in self-confidence, Wei Wuxian patted him on the shoulder.

“Relax. Just shoot as you did before.”

Wen Qionglin gave him a grateful look, took a deep breath, and drew the bow. But as soon as he did, Wei Wuxian shook his head inwardly and thought, *No good.*

Wen Qionglin had likely never shot an arrow in the presence of other people. He was shaking all over, from his arm to his fingertips. The arrow hurtled forth and missed the target totally.

The Wens watching him jeered.

“How is this good?!”

“I can shoot better than that with my eyes closed.”

“All right, let’s stop wasting time. Hurry up and pick someone!”

Wen Qionglin’s face flushed all the way to his ears. He didn’t even need the others to wave him away as he fled, mortified. Wei Wuxian chased after him.

“Hey, don’t run away! Um, what’s your… Qionglin-xiong, right? What are you running away for?”

Hearing Wei Wuxian calling after him, Wen Qionglin stopped and turned around. He hung his head, looking deeply ashamed. “…Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?” Wei Wuxian wondered.

Clearly feeling guilty, Wen Qionglin explained, “You…you recommended me, but I made you lose face…”

“What face is there for me to lose?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You don’t really shoot in front of others, right? Were you nervous just now?”

Wen Qionglin nodded, and Wei Wuxian said, “Have some confidence in yourself. I’ll be honest with you—you shoot better than anyone else in your clan. And of all the sect disciples I’ve seen, there are no more than three who are better at archery than you.”

Jiang Cheng walked over. “What are you up to now? Three what?”

Wei Wuxian pointed at Jiang Cheng. “There. This one, for example. He’s not as good as you in archery.”

Jiang Cheng flew into a rage. “You’re dead!”

Wei Wuxian accepted a blow from him. Without even batting an eyelash, he continued, “It’s true. There’s honestly nothing to be nervous about. Practice in front of others more often and you’ll get used to it. Next time, you’ll definitely make them see you in a new light.”

Wen Qionglin was probably a junior from a collateral branch of a collateral branch of the Wen Clan. His status was neither high nor low, but he was a timid, hesitant person with low self-esteem who stuttered when he spoke. He had finally mustered the courage to join the competition after much practice but had blown his chance because he was too nervous. Without proper guidance, this boy might withdraw even further from the world, never daring to show his skills in the presence of others again.

Wei Wuxian said a few words of encouragement, then briefly mentioned some key points that needed to be brought to his attention, correcting a few minor bad habits he'd noticed when he was shooting arrows in the garden. Wen Qionglin listened with rapt attention, nodding nonstop.

"How much bullshit do you want to spout?" Jiang Cheng said. "The competition is starting, so hurry up and get your ass to the arena!"

Wei Wuxian said to Wen Qionglin seriously, "I'm off to the competition now. You can watch how I shoot in the field…"

Jiang Cheng impatiently dragged him away, clicking his tongue as he did. "Watch what? You think you're a role model?!"

Wei Wuxian pondered the question and responded in an amazed tone, "Yeah. Am I not?"

"Wei Wuxian! I've never seen anyone as shameless as you!"

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Remembering their first encounter, Wei Wuxian's gaze shifted from Wen Ning to Jiang Cheng. He was still drenched in blood, eyes still shut tight. His hands were reflexively clenched into fists.

They first traveled by water, taking the boat down the river, and then swapped to land via a horse carriage Wen Ning had prepared.

The next day, they arrived in Yiling.

Wen Ning summoned dozens of sect disciples and personally escorted both of them to a large, splendid mansion with a courtyard. He snuck them through the back entrance and led Wei Wuxian to a small house on the mansion's grounds. Wen Ning had only just turned to close the door when Wei Wuxian caught him by the neck again, before he even had the chance to draw breath.

“What is this place?!” Wei Wuxian questioned in a hushed voice.

Even though Wen Ning had saved them, he couldn’t let his guard down around the Wens. He’d kept a constant eye on Wen Ning, and they’d passed quite a few rooms full of people conversing with Qishan accents as they moved through the mansion. Eavesdropping on a few isolated phrases that leaked through the gaps around the windows and doors, he’d caught the words “Overwatch Office”!

“No… I…” Flustered, Wen Ning waved his hands.

“No, what?” Wei Wuxian pressed. “Isn’t this the Overwatch Office in Yiling? Which unlucky clan’s territory did the Wens occupy this time? What exactly did you want to accomplish by bringing us here?”

Wen Ning tried his best to explain. “Wei-gongzi, l-listen to me. This is an Overwatch Office, but…but I never meant to harm you. If I wanted to, I could have gone back on my word last night as soon as I entered Lotus Pier. There would be n-no need to lure both of you here.”

Wei Wuxian had been wound tight and on edge the past few days, unable to relax for a single moment. His thoughts were confused and whirling, leaving him skeptical despite Wen Ning’s reasonable response.

“This is indeed the Overwatch Office,” Wen Ning added. “If there’s one place that the Wen Clan won’t search, it’s here. You can stay here. Just don’t let anyone find you…”

Wei Wuxian paused briefly before he finally forced himself to release his grip. He muttered a thank you and a sorry under his breath, then laid Jiang Cheng on the wooden bed in the room.

At that moment, the door to the room suddenly opened and a woman’s voice rang out.

“I was just about to go looking for you! You’d better give me a good explanation…”

Wen Ning had just told them they mustn’t be discovered—and now they’d been caught! Wei Wuxian promptly broke out in a cold sweat and moved to block the bed. Wen Ning was so startled he couldn’t utter a word.

Both were frozen in place as they stared at the woman standing in the doorway—or rather, the *young* woman. Her skin was slightly tanned, and though her face was sweet, it was turned up in a haughty expression. She wore a blazing sun uniform with flames so vividly red it looked like her sleeves and collar were a dancing inferno.

This clearly marked her as someone of extremely high rank in the Wen Clan—a rank on par with Wen Chao!

The three of them stood still as statues as they faced each other, until frantic footsteps came from outside. Wei Wuxian steeled himself and was just about to make a move when the young woman unexpectedly beat him to it. She slammed the door shut with a heavy thud, shutting herself out.

“Chief Officer Wen, what’s going on?” someone asked outside.

“Nothing. My younger brother is back,” they heard the young woman say coolly. “He’s feeling low again. Don’t bother him. Let’s go. We’ll continue our conversation when we return.”

The ones outside the door acknowledged her command and followed her away. Wen Ning breathed a sigh of relief and then turned to Wei Wuxian to explain.

“My…my elder sister.”

“Wen Qing is your elder sister?” Wei Wuxian asked.

A little embarrassed, Wen Ning nodded. “My elder sister is, is very formidable.”

Indeed, she was.

Wen Qing was renowned both within and without the Wen Clan of Qishan. She wasn’t the daughter of the head of the Wen family Wen Ruohan but rather the descendant of one of his elder cousins on the maternal side. Although they were distant relatives, Wen Ruohan had had a good relationship with his cousin since they were children. Furthermore, Wen Qing excelled in both the literary arts and the study of medicine. She was highly favored by Wen Ruohan for her talents and often attended the Wen Clan of Qishan’s various year-round banquets alongside him.

That was why Wei Wuxian was able to recognize her. After all, she was quite beautiful. He’d heard somewhere that she might have an older or younger brother, but no one really talked about him—perhaps because he was far less exceptional than Wen Qing.

“You’re really Wen Qing’s little brother?” Wei Wuxian asked in wonder.

Wen Ning thought he was astonished that such an unremarkable younger brother could be associated with such an outstanding, famous elder sister. “Yes, my jiejie is formidable. Not…not me though,” he admitted.

“No, no, you’re impressive too,” Wei Wuxian assured. “I’m just amazed that your elder sister is Wen Qing, the Chief Officer, and you still dared bring us…”

Just then, Jiang Cheng stirred on the bed and slightly furrowed his brow. Wei Wuxian immediately turned around to check on him.

“Jiang Cheng?!”

“He’s waking,” Wen Ning hurriedly said. “He needs treatment. I’ll go decoct some medicine.”

He stepped out and closed the door behind him. Wei Wuxian was overjoyed, at first, that Jiang Cheng had finally started to come around after being unconscious for so long. But he quickly realized something was amiss.

Jiang Cheng’s expression was odd. It was too calm. Much too calm.

He stared at the ceiling as if he was not in the least bit interested in his current circumstances. He seemed completely indifferent to where he was.

Wei Wuxian had not expected such a reaction from him. Sorrow, delight, rage, shock—none of those emotions seemed present at all. His heart leaped into his throat.

“Jiang Cheng, can you see me? Can you hear me? Do you recognize who I am?”

Jiang Cheng glanced at him and said nothing. Wei Wuxian tried asking him a few more questions. Finally, Jiang Cheng propped himself up on his elbows. He looked down at the wound from the discipline whip on his chest and let out a bitter laugh.

When the discipline whip struck, there was no removing the mark of shame. Against his own conscience, Wei Wuxian said, “Don’t look. We’ll find a way to get rid of it.”

Jiang Cheng struck a palm at him. The strike was so weak and feeble that Wei Wuxian did not even sway.

“Hit me all you want. As long as it makes you feel better.”

“Did you feel it?” Jiang Cheng asked.

Wei Wuxian was momentarily taken aback. “What? Feel what?”

“My spiritual power. Did you feel it?” Jiang Cheng pressed him.

“What spiritual power?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You didn’t use spiritual power at all.”

“I did.”

“What exactly… What did you say?”

Jiang Cheng repeated himself word for word. “I said, I used it. I used all my spiritual power and then some for that strike. So I’m asking you—did you feel it?”

Wei Wuxian stared at him, falling quiet. After a moment, he said, “Try hitting me again.”

“Forget it,” Jiang Cheng told him. “No matter how many times I hit you, the result will be the same. Wei Wuxian, do you know why Core-Melting Hand is called that?”

Wei Wuxian’s heart sank.

“Because his hands can dissolve golden cores and render the victims unable to form new ones,” Jiang Cheng continued. “Their spiritual power will dissipate, reducing them to nothing more than ordinary humans. And an ordinary human in a cultivation clan is good for nothing. They can only live out the rest of their common lives, abandoning all dreams of ever ascending higher.

“Wen Zhuliu dissolved Mom and Father’s golden cores. Once they lost the ability to fight back, he killed them.”

Wei Wuxian’s mind was in turmoil. At a loss as to what to do, he murmured, “…Core-Melting Hand… Core-Melting Hand…”

Jiang Cheng laughed grimly. “Wen Zhuliu, Wen Zhuliu. I want to seek revenge. I have to. But how can I? I don’t even have a golden core anymore, and I’ll never be able to form a new one again. So how am I going to take revenge? Ha ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

Wei Wuxian’s legs gave out from under him. He stared at Jiang Cheng, who seemed to have gone insane. Words failed him.

No one knew better than him just how competitive Jiang Cheng was. How much he valued his own cultivation and spiritual power. And with a single strike, Core-Melting Hand had shattered his cultivation, self-esteem, and hope for revenge to smithereens!

Jiang Cheng howled with laughter like a madman. He lay back down on the bed with his arms spread open and abandoned himself to despair. “Wei Wuxian, why did you save me? What’s the point of saving me? To let me live on uselessly while I watch the Wen dogs run rampant?”

Wen Ning reentered just then, carrying a bowl of medicinal decoction. He walked over to the bed with what appeared to be a deferential smile on his face, but before he could say a word, that blazing sun uniform entered Jiang Cheng’s field of vision. His pupils instantly shrank.

Jiang Cheng kicked out at Wen Ning, spilling the bowl of black decoction all over him. Wei Wuxian tried to catch the bowl of medicine as it overturned, and helped pull the petrified Wen Ning back while he was at it.

Jiang Cheng snarled at him, “What’s wrong with you?”

Wen Ning was so frightened he staggered backward. Jiang Cheng grabbed Wei Wuxian by the collar and shouted in his face.

“Why don’t you kill Wen dogs when you see them?! And you even helped him up? Do you have a death wish?!”

Although he exerted all the strength he had in him, his hands were still weak. Wei Wuxian broke free of his grip in no time, and it was then that Jiang Cheng seemed to notice where he was.

He scanned his surroundings and asked warily, “Where is this place?”

Wen Ning answered from the far side of the room, “The Yiling Overwatch Office, but it’s very safe…”

“Overwatch Office?” Jiang Cheng whirled around to accuse Wei Wuxian. “You willingly walked into their trap?”

“No!” Wei Wuxian denied.

“No?” Jiang Cheng snapped. “Then what are you doing in an Overwatch Office? How’d you get here? Don’t tell me you turned to a Wen dog for help?!”

Wei Wuxian grabbed hold of him. “Jiang Cheng, don’t panic. It’s safe here! Clear your head a little. Core-Melting Hand might be able to undo…”

Jiang Cheng was completely deaf to anyone’s words. He was half insane as he choked Wei Wuxian and broke out in hysterical laughter.

“Wei Wuxian, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, Wei Wuxian! You! You…”

Suddenly a red shadow kicked the door open and dashed inside. A streak of silver flashed as her palm struck down. It was a needle, and it had been jabbed into Jiang Cheng’s head. He immediately slumped backward.

Wen Qing spun around and closed the door.

In hushed tones, she rebuked her brother angrily. “Wen Ning, how foolish can you be?! You let him cackle and carry on and cause such a commotion? Do you want to be discovered?”

“Jiejie!” Wen Ning said in delight, as if he’d just seen his savior.

“Don’t you ‘jiejie’ me!” Wen Qing scolded. “I haven’t gotten to the part where I ask you when you became so audacious! To think you’d dare hide people here! I was investigating this earlier—no wonder you suddenly wanted to go to Yunmeng! You really are a gutsy one. Who gave you such courage? If Wen Chao finds out what you’ve done, he’ll tear you apart! Do you think I can stop him if he’s really determined to get rid of someone?”

She spoke rapidly but articulately, her tone so strong and forceful that it brooked no argument. Wei Wuxian couldn’t find a single opportunity to cut in.

Wen Ning’s face was as pale as snow. “Jiejie, but Wei-gongzi…”

“You did it out of gratitude, which is justifiable. I won’t say a word more on that matter,” Wen Qing said sternly. “But those two can’t stay here! You went over there, then left so suddenly, and they went missing right after. Do you think Wen Chao is that stupid? Sooner or later, they’ll come looking here. This is the Overwatch Office under my jurisdiction, and this is your room. If the others discover you harbored them here, what charge do you think they’ll convict you of? Think about it!”

She listed the stakes so clearly, it was as though she’d pointed at Wei Wuxian’s nose and told him bluntly to get lost, to leave and not burden them further. If Wei Wuxian had been the one injured, or if it had been someone else who saved them, he would've had no qualms about bidding farewell and leaving right away. But it was Jiang Cheng who was injured; he'd lost his core and was utterly out of his mind. With Jiang Cheng like this, Wei Wuxian could not bring himself to leave.

Besides, it was the Wen Clan who'd gotten them into this mess to begin with. He couldn't take it lying down.

And so, Wei Wuxian could only grit his teeth and keep silent.

"But, but the Wen Clan…" Wen Ning began.

"What the Wen Clan does is not representative of what *we* do," Wen Qing interrupted him. "The sins of the Wen Clan are not ours to bear. Wei Ying, don't look at me like that. Every debt has its own debtor. I'm the Chief Officer here in Yiling, but I was ordered to assume the post. I am a doctor, and I have never killed anyone—much less have the blood of your Jiang Clan on my hands!"

That was the truth. Wei Wuxian had never heard of Wen Qing killing anyone, only that people hoped she'd take over for their regions. Wen Qing was one of the rare Wens who acted and behaved normally. Her reputation had always been decent, and sometimes she could even put in a good word for others with Wen Ruohan.

Silence reigned in the room.

After a while, Wen Qing said, "Don't pull out that needle. If he's conscious, that boy is sure to throw another fit. I could hear all that yelling and shouting from outside. Pull it out when he recovers, then leave as soon as possible. I don't want to deal with Wen Chao, especially that woman attached to him. The sight of her disgusts me!"

Having said that, she left the room decisively.

"She…means we can't stay for long, but we can stay for a few days…right?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Ning hurriedly nodded. "Thank you, jiejie!"

A packet of medicinal herbs was tossed in from outside the door.

"Put in some effort if you really want to thank me!" Wen Qing scolded from afar. "What the hell was that medicine you decocted earlier? Redo it!"

The packet of medicinal herbs smacked right into Wen Ning, but he still very happily said, “Any medicine my sister prepared is sure to be good. A hundred times better than mine. Superb, for certain.”

Wei Wuxian finally relaxed completely. “Thank you.”

Wei Wuxian knew the two siblings were putting themselves at great risk, one by turning a blind eye and the other by voluntarily helping them. It was just as Wen Qing had said—if Wen Chao was really determined to dispose of someone, Wen Qing might not be able to stop him and might even end up a target herself. After all, somebody else’s children could never be compared to one’s own.

With the needle securely embedded in his head, Jiang Cheng slept for three days. His broken bones repaired themselves and his superficial wounds smoothed over, but he was destined to never fully heal—the lash from the discipline whip could never be erased, and his golden core could never be recovered.

During those three days, Wei Wuxian thought things over.

After three days, he bade Wen Ning farewell. He walked for some distance with Jiang Cheng on his back and borrowed a small cabin from a forester. He closed the door and removed the silver needle from Jiang Cheng’s head.

It was a long time before Jiang Cheng finally opened his eyes.

Though awake, he remained motionless, not even flipping over and asking where they were. He wouldn’t eat or drink. It was as if he was interested only in dying.

“Do you really want to die?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“I can’t get revenge even if I live, so I might as well die. Who knows, maybe I can even turn into a malicious ghost,” Jiang Cheng said.

“You’ve gone through Soul-Tranquilization Rites since you were a kid. Even if you die, you won’t turn into a malicious ghost,” Wei Wuxian commented.

“Since I can’t seek revenge dead or alive, what difference does it make if I live or die?”

After that, Jiang Cheng didn’t speak again.

Wei Wuxian sat by the bed and looked at him for a while, then patted his legs, stood up, and began to bustle around. Evening came, and he finally finished cooking. He set the dishes on the table.

“Get up. Mealtime.”

Jiang Cheng, of course, ignored him. Wei Wuxian sat at the table and picked up a pair of chopsticks.

“If you don’t replenish your strength, how are you going to get your golden core back?”

On hearing the words “golden core,” Jiang Cheng finally blinked.

“That’s right,” Wei Wuxian continued. “No need to doubt it. You heard me right. I said ‘get your golden core back.’”

Jiang Cheng moved his lips, his voice dry and hoarse, “…You have a way?”

“I do,” Wei Wuxian said calmly. He turned around. “You’ve known for a long time that my mother Cangse-sanren was Baoshan-sanren’s disciple.”

That one simple sentence lit up Jiang Cheng’s lifeless eyes in an instant.

Baoshan-sanren, the cultivation master who legends said had lived for eight hundred years. An otherworldly master who could revive the dead!

His voice trembled. “You’re… You’re saying…”

Wei Wuxian repeated clearly, “I’m saying that I know which mountain this ‘Baoshan’ embraces. In other words, I can take you to find Baoshan-sanren.”

“…But…but I thought you didn’t remember anything from your childhood?!”

“It’s not that I don’t remember *anything*,” Wei Wuxian explained. “I haven’t forgotten the bits that were drilled into my mind. Among other things, I remember a woman’s voice repeating a location to me over and over. The voice said that if I were to find myself in a desperate predicament with no other options, I could go there and climb the mountain to ask the immortal for help.”

Jiang Cheng instantly rolled off the bed and lunged at the table. Wei Wuxian pushed a bowl and chopsticks over to him.

“Eat.”

Jiang Cheng clutched at the edge of the table. Overwhelmed with emotion, he tried to speak. “I…”

“Eat,” Wei Wuxian said again. “We’ll talk as we eat. Or else I won’t say a word.”

Jiang Cheng could only clamber onto the bench, pick up the chopsticks and begin to shovel rice into his mouth. He had originally lost all hope, but with this turn of events, he suddenly saw a light at the end of the tunnel. He was so worked up with excitement that he seemed to be on fire; he could barely sit still and didn’t even notice that he was holding his chopsticks upside down. It was only when Wei Wuxian saw him starting to eat, his mind preoccupied with purpose, that he continued.

“I’ll take you there in a few days.”

“Today!” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“What are you afraid of?” Wei Wuxian said. “Do you think a centuries-old immortal will poof away in the next few days? The reason I said it’ll take a few days is because there are taboos I must tell you about. If you transgress and anger the grandmaster, it’ll all be over. You and I will be goners.”

Jiang Cheng stared at him with wide eyes, hoping he’d say more.

“Once you go up the mountain, you can’t open your eyes and look around,” Wei Wuxian continued. “You can’t memorize the scenery or look at anyone else’s face. No matter what the other party tells you to do, you must obey.”

“Okay!” Jiang Cheng said.

“And the most important thing…” Wei Wuxian added. “…If you’re asked for your identity, you must say you are the son of Cangse-sanren. You must never reveal your true identity!”

“Okay!” Jiang Cheng said.

It seemed he'd say *okay*, his eyes reddened, to whatever Wei Wuxian asked of him.

"All right, let's eat. Regain your strength and energy," Wei Wuxian instructed. "I have to make some preparations over the next few days."

Jiang Cheng finally realized he was holding his chopsticks upside down and swapped them over to gobble down a few more mouthfuls. It was so spicy it made his eyes water, and he couldn't help but curse. "…Horrible!"

After being questioned repeatedly for details about Baoshan-sanren, Wei Wuxian set off a few days later with Jiang Cheng in tow. They trekked through difficult terrain and over rivers, and finally came to the foot of a remote mountain in Yiling.

The mountain was lush and green, with beautiful emerald peaks and summits surrounded by clouds and mists. It did have an air of transcendence, but there were still some discrepancies between it and the sacred mountain everyone imagined.

Jiang Cheng was suspicious. One moment he suspected Wei Wuxian was lying to him, and the next, that Wei Wuxian had heard or remembered something wrong when he was a child. And the moment after that, he'd be worrying whether they'd ever be able to find it.

Upon seeing the mountain, he started doubting again. "Is this really where Baoshan-sanren resides?"

"This is definitely the place," Wei Wuxian replied with conviction. "What's the use of lying to you? So you'll be happy for a few days, only to take a heavier blow later?"

They'd already had a similar exchange countless times. Wei Wuxian accompanied him halfway up the mountain.

"All right. From this point onward, I can't go with you."

He took out a piece of cloth and blindfolded Jiang Cheng, repeatedly cautioning him.

"You must never, ever open your eyes. There are no predatory beasts on the mountain. Walk slowly, but even if you fall, you mustn't pull off the blindfold. There is absolutely no room for curiosity. Remember, insist that you are Wei Wuxian. You know how you should answer whatever questions you're asked, right?"

His ability to reform his golden core and seek revenge depended on this. Naturally, Jiang Cheng did not dare be negligent. He nodded nervously, then turned and slowly began to make his way up. Wei Wuxian called out after him.

"I'll wait for you in the town we came across earlier!"

After watching Jiang Cheng slowly shuffle away, he turned around and took another mountain path.

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Jiang Cheng spent seven days on the mountain.

The town where they had agreed to meet up was in a mountainous region itself, very remote, with just a few citizens. The streets were narrow and uneven, and there weren't even any vendors by the roadside.

Wei Wuxian squatted by the road as he gazed in the direction of the mountain. Still not catching any sight of Jiang Cheng, he pushed himself up and stood. He felt a wave of dizziness and staggered for a moment before walking toward the one and only teahouse in town.

The teahouse was the only building in town that was not simple and rudimentary. As soon as he stepped in, a waiter came up to him with a smile.

"Can I get you a drink?"

Wei Wuxian's mind jolted.

He was exhausted, having been constantly on the move for the past few days. He hadn't had the presence of mind to tidy himself up and probably looked unkempt. It would be a miracle if the staff of a typical teahouse didn't pull faces at the sight of him and boot him out at once. This man rushing over to greet him with such enthusiasm seemed fake.

He swept a swift glance around the teahouse. The cashier stood behind the counter with his head practically buried in the ledger. Seven or eight people sat scattered across ten tables. Many of them wore cloaks and were drinking tea with their heads down, as if to conceal something.

Wei Wuxian immediately made his decision and turned to leave. But he'd only taken one step out of the teahouse door when a tall, shadowy figure pressed in close and, in one thunderous move, struck him in the chest.

He crashed into two tables, sending them flying. The waiter and cashier fled in panic, and the seven or eight people inside removed their cloaks to reveal the blazing sun uniforms underneath. Wen Zhuliu strode over the threshold and stood before Wei Wuxian. With a pensive expression, he looked at him as he struggled to stand, then at his own palm.

Someone kicked Wei Wuxian in the back of the knee, making him fall heavily to the ground.

Wen Chao's face appeared above him, his expression one of cruel excitement.

"Down already?! You stinkin' bastard, weren't you quite the jumper in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave? Just one strike and you're finished? Ha ha ha. Go on, jump around again. Let's see how you manage!"

Wang Lingjiao's impatient voice rang out. "Quick! Wen-gongzi, chop off his arm! He still owes us an arm!"

"No, no, no. No rush," Wen Chao said. "It wasn't easy to find this guy. Cutting off his arm will make him bleed out, and it's boring if he dies that quickly. Dissolve his core first. I want to hear him scream like that little bastard Jiang Cheng did!"

"Then dissolve his core and get to chopping off his arm!" Wang Lingjiao insisted.

While they were merrily discussing their preferred methods, Wei Wuxian suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood. "Sure! Whatever torture you people have, bring it on!"

"You asked for it," Wang Lingjiao said with a laugh.

"Still trying to play the hero when you're on the verge of death?!" Wen Chao scorned.

Wei Wuxian sneered at him. “It’s *because* I’m on the verge of death that I’m happy! I was afraid I couldn’t die. Torture me if you dare! The more brutal, the better—that way, I’ll be sure to return as a malicious ghost and haunt everyone in the Wen Clan of Qishan. I’ll curse you all and not allow you a single hour of rest!”

At those words, Wen Chao wavered. Descendants of illustrious clans, such as Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan, were nurtured by their families and influenced by their spiritual weapons from birth. As they matured, they underwent countless Soul-Tranquilization Rites in order to minimize the chance of them turning into malicious ghosts after death.

But Wei Wuxian was different. He was the son of a servant. He hadn’t been with the Jiang Clan since birth, and so he hadn’t had the opportunity to undergo a full suite of Soul-Tranquilization Rites. If he died full of resentment that corrupted his lingering soul into a malicious ghost bent on haunting them, that would indeed be a headache. The more torment he suffered in life, and the crueller and more drawn-out that torment was, the more savage and unmanageable his malicious ghost would be in death.

Seeing this hesitation, Wang Lingjiao hurriedly piped up. “Wen-gongzi, don’t listen to his nonsense. It’s not like anyone can just turn right into a malicious ghost after death. The time and place and conditions all have to be right, or he won’t be able to manage it! Besides, even if he really does pull it off, don’t tell me the Wen Clan of Qishan can’t handle one wandering ghost?! Haven’t we been hunting him all this time specifically to punish him? Or are we going to let him off just because he bluffed?”

“Of course not!” Wen Chao said.

Knowing that death was all but certain, Wei Wuxian felt increasingly calm. The bone-deep hatred in him hardened into a determination as cold as iron.

His expression made Wen Chao displeased, but it also made his hair stand on end. He kicked Wei Wuxian in the stomach.

“Still pretending, huh?! Who are you trying to scare?! Stop pretending to be a hero!”

The sect disciples followed suit and pummeled him. It was only when Wen Chao felt they’d done enough that he barked, “Enough!”

Wei Wuxian coughed up another mouthful of blood. He thought furiously, *Time to deal the killing blow? Dying is all the same; no worse than living. And my odds of turning into a vengeful malicious ghost are one in three!*

To his surprise, he felt incredibly excited by the prospect.

But Wen Chao said, “Wei Ying, you consider yourself a dauntless man who fears nothing, one who is both brave and mighty. Don’t you?”

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian sounded surprised. “So Wen dogs can actually manage to say something that makes sense?”

Wen Chao’s fist slammed down. He grinned nastily. “Go on, mouth off all you want. I gotta see how long you can keep up that heroic act!”

He ordered his men to seize Wei Wuxian. Wen Zhuliu walked over and picked him off the ground. Wei Wuxian strained to raise his head to look at the man who had killed Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu and destroyed Jiang Cheng’s golden core. He seared his face and his indifferent expression into his mind.

The Wen Clan group took off on their swords with Wei Wuxian in tow. The town and the remote mountain gradually grew farther and farther away. *Even if Jiang Cheng descends the mountain, he won’t find me…*Wei Wuxian thought. *Why are they flying so high in the air? To throw me to my death from the clouds?*

After flying for some time, a black mountain suddenly broke through the layers of snow-white clouds. It was wreathed in an ominous, deathly aura, as if it were a gargantuan thousand-year-old corpse. Even laying eyes on it from afar struck terror into one’s heart.

Wen Chao stopped over this mountain. “Wei Ying, do you know what this place is?” He laughed cruelly. “This place is called the Burial Mounds.”

The name caused a chill to creep up Wei Wuxian’s spine.

“The Burial Mounds are right here in Yiling,” Wen Chao continued. “You people from Yunmeng must have heard that name before. This is a mountain of corpses, an ancient battleground. Stick a shovel in any spot on the mountain and you’ll unearth a corpse. Any unnamed corpses are also wrapped in mats and thrown here.”

The formation of swords slowly descended closer to the mountain.

"Look at all this dark energy. Tsk, tsk, tsk," Wen Chao said. "The hatred is intense, isn't it? And the resentment too? Even the Wen Clan can't do anything about it. We can only close it off and prohibit anyone from entering. It's daytime now, but once night falls, all manner of creatures will awake inside. When a living person enters this place, there's no coming back—for the body or the soul. They can forget about ever escaping."

He grabbed Wei Wuxian's hair. With a nasty grin, he enunciated every word of his next statement. "You, too, can forget about ever escaping!"

With that, he threw Wei Wuxian off the sword.

"Ahhhhhhhhh—!"

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Chapter 13:
Ill Winds

"AHHHHHHH—!"

Wang Lingjiao screamed as she sat bolt upright in bed. Wen Chao, who had been in the middle of reading a letter, slapped the tabletop furiously.

"What are you howling about again in the middle of the night?!"

Still badly shaken, Wang Lingjiao gasped for breath. "I…I dreamed of that Wei guy. I dreamed of him again!"

"It's been over three months since I threw him into the Burial Mounds," Wen Chao said. "Why do you still dream about him? It's been so many times!"

"I…I don't know why either. I just keep dreaming about him lately," Wang Lingjiao replied.

The letter had already left Wen Chao upset. He didn't have time to pay attention to her, and wasn't in the mood to hold and comfort her as he had in the past. "Then don't sleep!" he snapped impatiently.

She got out of bed and threw herself at the table where Wen Chao sat. "Wen-gongzi, I… The more I think about it, the more scared I am. I wonder…did we make a huge mistake? …Could he have survived being thrown into the Burial Mounds? Would he…"

Wen Chao's temples throbbed incessantly. "How is that possible? How many cultivators has our clan sent to their death in the Burial Mounds? Have any of them ever returned? After being tossed in there, he's probably already a stinking, rotten corpse."

"It's scary even if he's dead!" Wang Lingjiao exclaimed. "If he turned into a malicious ghost like he said he would and came back for us…"

As she spoke, they both remembered Wei Ying's face and expression when he plummeted that day. Simultaneously, they shuddered.

Wen Chao immediately refuted her concerns. "It's not possible even if he's dead! The souls of those who die in the Burial Mounds are imprisoned there. Don't scare yourself. Can't you see I'm stressed right now?!" He crumpled the intelligence report in his hand into a ball and flung it away. "What Sunshot Campaign?" he said rancorously. "Sunshot, my ass. They wanna shoot the sun down? Keep dreaming!"

Wang Lingjiao stood up and cautiously poured him a cup of tea. After deliberating over some ingratiating words, she began to fawn over him. "Wen-gongzi, those other clans can only run rampant for so long. Sect Leader Wen will immediately…"

"Shut up!" Wen Chao cursed. "What the hell do you know?! Get out! Don't bother me!"

Aggrieved and a little bitter, Wang Lingjiao set down the teacup, fixed her hair and gauze robe, and walked out with a smile on her lips.

As soon as she stepped out, the smile fell away, and she peeled open the wad of paper in her hands. She'd secretly picked up the letter Wen Chao had tossed away, wanting to see exactly what news had put him in such a temper. She couldn't recognize many words, but after flipping the paper back and forth for a bit, finally fumbled through the gist of it: Wen Xu, the eldest son of Sect Leader Wen and eldest brother of Wen Chao, had been beheaded by one of the clan heads leading the revolt. His head was then mounted on the battlefield as a display of might!

Wang Lingjiao was stunned.

The Lan Clan of Gusu had been burned down, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng had been annihilated, and countless other families big and small were being persecuted in various ways. It wasn't that voices of resistance didn't exist—just that they had always been quickly quelled by the Wen Clan of Qishan. That was why they hadn't taken it seriously, three months ago, when the four clans of Jin, Nie, Lan, and Jiang formed an alliance and revolted under the banner of—whatever they called it, the "Sunshot Campaign" or something.

Sect Leader Wen had spoken, then. Of the four clans, the Jin Clan of Lanling was the fence-sitter, only deciding to join the alliance when they saw other clans taking the initiative to march against the Wens. If they suffered repeated defeats, the head of the Jin Clan would quickly decide they were just bringing trouble on themselves and double back to cling to the Wen Sect’s leg and cry for mercy.

The head of the Nie Clan of Qinghe, on the other hand, was too rigid and therefore easy to break. He couldn’t possibly last for long. Sooner or later, he would die at the hands of one of his own, without needing anyone else to take action.

The Lan Clan of Gusu had been burned to the ground. Lan Xichen, having saved the contents of the Library Pavilion, had returned to become the head of the family. But he was merely a junior, unable to shoulder any significant responsibility.

The most laughable of all was the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng—with the entire sect slaughtered or dispersed, only Jiang Cheng remained, and he was even younger than Lan Xichen. He was a stinking brat, still wet behind the ears, with no one under him. And he still dared call himself a family head! He’d raised the Jiang Sect banner on a crusade against the Wens and recruited new sect disciples while he was at it.

In short, these clans’ ambitions were unpromising and over-confident!

Everyone on the Wens’ side considered the Sunshot Campaign a joke. But three months later, the situation had not developed the way they had anticipated!

It was one thing for strategic spots in Hejian, Yunmeng, and the like to be wrested from their control. But to think that even the eldest son of Sect Leader Wen had been beheaded…

Wang Lingjiao stewed with uneasiness in the corridor for a while before returning to her own room, still unsettled. Her eye kept twitching madly. She rubbed it while pressing a hand over her chest, contemplating her own exit route.

She had been with Wen Chao for almost half a year, going by her count. Half a year was as long as it took for Wen Chao to go from being fond of a woman to being bored of her. She’d initially thought she was special, that she could hold out to the very end. But Wen Chao’s growing impatience of late had warned her she was no different from the others.

Biting her lip, Wang Lingjiao thought for a moment, then crouched to pull a small chest from under the bed.

This small chest contained all the valuables and precious weapons she had managed to fleece for herself by every means possible during the six months she'd spent by Wen Chao's side. The valuables could be spent, and the weapons used for self-protection. Though she hadn't wanted to accept it, the day had finally come.

Wanting to take inventory of how much stuff she had, she dug a small key from her belt and opened the lock, grumbling, "Scumbag, greasy toad, you're gonna die sooner or later. I'm only too glad to not have to serve you anymore… *Ah!*"

She fell back and slumped on the ground.

She had seen what was inside the chest the very instant she opened it—none of the treasures she'd once cherished. The only thing huddled in the chest was a ghastly pale child!

Wang Lingjiao shrieked with fright as she kicked out both legs to retreat backward. She always kept this chest locked and kept the only key on her at all times. How could there be a child inside? She barely even opened it once a month. How could she not know if a child was hidden in there? How could the child still be alive?!

She kicked the chest over, overturning it so the bottom faced her. For a long time, there was no movement.

With shaking legs, Wang Lingjiao clambered up off the ground. She wanted to get closer to take another look but didn't dare to.

There's a ghost, a ghost! she thought.

Her cultivation was extremely weak, so if there *was* a ghost, she couldn't deal with it on her own. But it suddenly occurred to her that this was the Overwatch Office. There were talismans pasted outside the main gate and on the exterior of every room that would surely protect her. Rushing out, she tore down the talisman outside her room and stuck it on her chest.

With a talisman on her chest, she was more at ease. She tiptoed back into the room and found a garment hook, which she used to turn the chest over from afar. All her treasures were stacked neatly inside. There was no child at all.

Wang Lingjiao breathed a sigh of relief. She crouched down with the garment hook in hand and was about to start taking inventory when she suddenly noticed two pinpricks of bright light under her bed.

It was a pair of eyes.

The pale child was lying under the bed, meeting her gaze.

This was the third time tonight that Wen Chao had heard Wang Lingjiao scream. His fury blazed higher, and he roared, “Stupid bitch! So jumpy. Can’t you give me a fucking break?”

The influx of aggravating news had temporarily left him without time to seek out new beauties. Not to mention his worry that those he *did* find would be shady, unreliable assassins sent by those insignificant clans. If it weren’t for that, as well as his need for someone to warm his bed at all times, he would long have told that woman to scram.

“Men! Make her shut up!” he bellowed.

No one answered. Wen Chao kicked a stool, sending it flying. The flames of his anger blazed yet higher.

“Where the hell is everyone?!”

All of a sudden, the door to his room was flung open. Wen Chao snapped, “I told you people to shut that bitch up, not barge in…”

The moment he turned his head, the latter half of his statement died in his throat. He saw a woman standing in the doorway of his room.

This woman’s facial features were all crooked, as if someone had smashed them to pieces and then fitted them back together. Both her eyeballs aimed in different directions—the left staring at a crooked angle above, and the right staring crookedly below. Her face was contorted beyond recognition. It took Wen Chao a great deal of effort to recognize her from her revealing gauze robe.

It was Wang Lingjiao!

Wang Lingjiao’s throat gurgled as she took several steps closer to him and reached out her hands. “…Help…help…save me…”

Wen Chao screamed and unsheathed his new sword, slashing at her. “Get out! Get lost!”

His sword sunk into Wang Lingjiao’s shoulder, and her features contorted even more as she shrieked. “*Ahhhhhh*…it hurts, ahhhh—it hurts, *ahhhh*!”

Wen Chao didn’t even dare pull out his sword. He grabbed a stool and bashed her with it, shattering the stool. Wang Lingjiao staggered and then kneeled, prostrating herself on the ground as if she was kowtowing to someone. Her words were incoherent as she mumbled and sobbed.

“…I’m sorry…I’m sorry…spare me, spare me, spare me…”

As she kowtowed, blood flowed from her seven apertures. She was blocking the doorway, so Wen Chao could not flee but only push open the window and scream heartrendingly.

“Wen Zhuliu! WEN ZHULIU!”

On the ground, Wang Lingjiao had snatched up a leg from the shattered stool. She frantically stuffed it into her mouth, laughing as she did.

“Okay, okay, I’ll eat it, I’ll eat it! Ha ha, I’ll eat it!”

And just like that, a section of the stool leg was shoved down her throat!

Wen Chao was scared out of his wits. Just as he was about to jump out of the window and flee, he suddenly noticed something in the courtyard. There stood a figure dressed in black, stark amidst the moonlight pooling on the ground.

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Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng was standing before a forest when he sensed someone approach. He turned his head slightly. The newcomer was dressed in white, and the tails of his forehead ribbon fluttered behind him with his hair. He was exceedingly handsome and refined, with a face as fair as jade. The moonlight washed him in a soft glow.

“Lan-er-gongzi,” Jiang Cheng greeted him coolly.

With a solemn expression, Lan Wangji nodded. “Sect Leader Jiang.”

Neither of them had anything more to say after exchanging greetings. And so, they set off on their swords in silence with the cultivators of their respective sects following behind.

Two months ago, the Twin Jades of Lan and Jiang Cheng had launched a surprise raid on Wen Chao’s “Education Office” to seize the swords that had been confiscated from the various clans’ disciples and return them to their rightful owners. It was only then that Sandu and Bichen had been returned to them.

Lan Wangji swept his light-colored eyes over the other sword at Jiang Cheng’s waist, then looked away. After a while, eyes still directed forward, he asked, “Has Wei Ying still not shown himself?”

Jiang Cheng cast him a glance, as if curious why he would suddenly ask about Wei Ying. “No.”

He glanced at Suibian, which hung at his waist.

“My people still haven’t turned up any news on him, but he’ll definitely come looking for me when he returns. When he does, I’ll return his sword.”

Not long after this exchange, the two of them and the cultivators they led arrived at the Overwatch Office where Wen Chao was hiding, preparing to launch a night-time raid. They had yet to enter when Lan Wangji’s eyes hardened and Jiang Cheng frowned.

Yin energy contaminated the air and resentment flowed all around them, but the talismans on both sides of the door were perfectly intact. Jiang Cheng gestured, and the cultivators he’d brought along scattered and crouched low at the enclosing walls. He brandished Sandu, and the sword’s qi assaulted the door and broke it open.

Before they entered, Lan Wangji’s gaze briefly swept over the talismans on both sides of the doorframe.

Inside the Overwatch Office was an incomparably horrific sight.

Corpses were strewn all over the courtyard. But the slaughter wasn’t limited to that area—even the flowering shrubs, the corridors, the wooden railings, and the roofs were littered with bodies.

All the corpses wore the blazing sun uniform. All were Wen disciples. Jiang Cheng turned a corpse over with Sandu and saw the blood streaking its ghastly pale face.

“Bleeding from the seven apertures,” he announced.

“Not this one,” Lan Wangji said from the other end of the courtyard.

Jiang Cheng walked over and found a corpse with both eyes rolled back into its head. Its face was twisted beyond recognition, and yellow bile trickled from its mouth. This person had been literally scared to death.

One of his sect disciples said, “Sect Leader, we have examined them all—they’re all dead. The causes of death are all different.”

Strangled, burned, drowned, poisoned, frozen, throat slit, sharp object through the brain…once Jiang Cheng had listened to it all, he commented somberly, “Looks like some other creature helped us accomplish our mission tonight.”

Lan Wangji said nothing, but entered the residential wing first.

The door to Wen Chao’s room was wide open. Only a flimsily dressed female corpse remained inside. Half a stool leg jutted from her gaping mouth. It seemed she had attempted to force a stool leg down her throat and into her stomach, and died in the process.

Jiang Cheng turned the corpse’s distorted face to inspect it. He stared for a while, then sneered and grabbed the leg of the stool to shove it hard into her mouth, thrusting in the remaining half that still protruded.

He stood up, eyes red. He was just about to speak when he saw Lan Wangji standing at the door, deep in thought with furrowed brows. He walked over and followed Lan Wangji’s line of sight, only to see a yellow talisman with vermilion characters stuck on the door.

At first glance, there didn’t seem to be anything off about the talisman. But a closer look showed some subtle but extremely disconcerting details.

“Extra strokes,” Lan Wangji commented.

Jiang Cheng’s expression grew severe. “I knew it.”

Ever since they were fifteen or sixteen years old, they'd known how to draw this kind of residence protection talisman by heart. Among the lively and vigorous vermilion flourishes on this talisman were a few additional strokes. It was these few strokes that changed the pattern of the entire talisman. Looking at it now, the talisman stuck to the door seemed to depict a person's sinisterly smiling face.

They didn't find Wen Chao or Wen Zhuliu's bodies at the Overwatch Office. Jiang Cheng inferred that they must have fled in the direction of Qishan and immediately led his men to withdraw from the abandoned office and pursue them via sword flight. However, Lan Wangji returned to Gusu first.

The next day, he caught up with Jiang Cheng and took out the talisman from the night before.

"This talisman has been reversed."

"Reversed?" Jiang Cheng repeated. "Meaning…?"

"Ordinary talismans repel evil," Lan Wangji replied. "This one attracts it."

Jiang Cheng was astounded. "A talisman that attracts evil? That's unheard of."

"Indeed," Lan Wangji said. "But tests show that it has the ability to summon and assemble things nefarious."

Jiang Cheng took the talisman and scrutinized it. "Just adding a few strokes reverses the function of the entire talisman? Was this done by a human?"

"A total of four strokes were added, drawn with human blood," Lan Wangji said. "Every residence protection talisman at the Overwatch Office was altered. The pattern of the brush strokes indicate it was done by the same person."

"Who could they possibly be?" Jiang Cheng wondered. "I've never heard of any renowned cultivators capable of doing such a thing." Then he added, "But no matter who he is, it's all good as long as his goal is the same as ours—to slaughter every last Wen dog!"

Following the intel they'd received, the two headed northward. In every area they passed, they heard locals gossiping about strange corpses who had died violent deaths. These corpses were all dressed in blazing sun uniforms. All Wen cultivators. All of them were of high rank and had remarkable cultivation but had still died horribly and in a horrifying variety of ways, their corpses left on display in crowded areas.

"Do you think they were all killed by *that* person?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"The evil aura is intense," Lan Wangji replied. "It must be the work of the same individual."

Jiang Cheng snorted. "Evil? Is there anyone eviler than the Wen dogs in this world?!"

They maintained their pursuit until late into the night of the fourth day, when they finally picked up Wen Zhuliu's trail near a post station in a remote mountain city.

The post station had two stories, with a stable at the side. When Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng arrived, they saw a large figure charge into the building and lock the door. Both of them were wary of Wen Zhuliu's Core-Melting Hand, so in the interest of not alerting the enemy, they leapt onto the rooftop rather than enter through the door. Forcing himself to endure the overpowering hatred in his heart, Jiang Cheng ground his teeth and peered through a crack between the roof tiles at the scene playing out below.

A travel-worn Wen Zhuliu carried someone in his arms as he trudged up to the second floor. He set the person he carried beside the table and dashed to the windows to draw all the curtains, sealing off the room entirely. Only then did he return to the table and light the oil lamp.

The faint light illuminated his face. It was still wan and grim, but there were now heavy dark circles under the eyes. The other person at the table was tightly bundled in his cloak like a fragile cocoon, with even his face concealed. He cowered inside the fabric, trembling and gasping for breath.

"Don't light the lamp!" he suddenly said. "What if he discovers us?!"

Lan Wangji raised his head and exchanged looks with Jiang Cheng. Both had the same curious expression. That had to be Wen Chao, but how had his voice gotten like that? It was so shrill and small that it didn’t sound like Wen Chao at all.

Wen Zhuliu lowered his head to rummage around in his sleeves. “You think he won’t find us if we don’t light the lamp?”

“We…we ran so far and for so long,” Wen Chao panted. “He…he shouldn’t be able to catch us, right?!”

“Perhaps,” Wen Zhuliu answered in an indifferent tone.

“What do you mean, ‘perhaps’?!” Wen Chao exclaimed angrily. “If we haven’t gotten far enough away from him yet, then why didn’t you keep running?!”

“You need to take your medicine, or you’ll die,” Wen Zhuliu replied.

He lifted Wen Chao’s cloak as he spoke. The pair on the rooftop were stunned at the sight that waited beneath.

Beneath the cloak was not Wen Chao’s arrogant, domineering, greasily handsome face—but a bald head swathed in bandages.

Wen Zhuliu peeled off the bandages layer by layer until the bald man’s skin was exposed. His face was marred by uneven burns and scars. It looked like he’d been cooked. He was so hideous, so ugly, that not a single hint remained of the man he had once been!

Wen Zhuliu took out a bottle of medicine and fed him several pills. Then he took out some salve and applied it to the burns on his head and face. Wen Chao whimpered in pain.

“Do not shed tears,” Wen Zhuliu advised. “Tears will make the wounds fester and the pain increase.”

Wen Chao had no choice but to hold back his tears, unable to even cry. In the tiny flickering firelight, the bald, burned man bared his teeth in a grimace, making strange, indistinct sounds. The lamp’s flame wavered on the edge of death, struggling bright and fading dim. It was a sight that was beyond horrifying.

Suddenly, Wen Chao let out a shriek.

“Flute! A flute! Is that the sound of a flute?! I heard him playing the flute again!”

"No!" Wen Zhuliu reassured. "It's the sound of the wind."

However, Wen Chao was already so scared that he'd fallen to the ground howling. Wen Zhuliu picked him up again. It appeared there was something wrong with Wen Chao's legs, making him unable to walk by himself.

After applying the salve, Wen Zhuliu produced several steamed buns from his robes and handed them to Wen Chao.

"Eat. We'll continue on our way once you are done."

Wen Chao held a bun with both shuddering hands and took a bite. The sight reminded Jiang Cheng of the day he and Wei Wuxian had fled, of the tragic plight they'd been in, without a single bite of food to share between them. This was truly karma! Feeling buoyant, his lips curled into a smile, and he laughed madly and silently.

As Wen Chao bit down, a horrifying expression twisted his face. With a shriek, he hurled the steamed bun away.

"I won't eat meat! I won't eat it! I'm not eating it! No meat!"

Wen Zhuliu handed him another one. "This one doesn't have meat."

"I'm not eating anymore!" Wen Chao screamed. "Take it away! Get lost! I want to look for my dad. When can we get back to my dad's place?!"

"At this speed, two more days," Wen Zhuliu replied.

He spoke honestly, never exaggerating or falsifying his words. But it was this honesty that put Wen Chao in even more extreme misery.

"Two days?" he croaked in a hoarse voice. "*Two days?!* Look at the state I'm in. What will I look like if I wait another two days?! You useless thing!"

Wen Zhuliu abruptly shot to his feet, and Wen Chao flinched, thinking he was about to flee on his own. All of a sudden, he knew fear. One after another, every single one of his guards had come to a violent end before his eyes. Wen Zhuliu was the strongest of his defenders, and the last one he could count on. He hurriedly changed his tune.

"No, no, no, Wen Zhuliu…Wen-da-ge! Don't go. You can't abandon me. As long as you bring me back to my dad, I'll get him to promote you to be the highest-ranking guest cultivator! No, I mean—you saved me, so you're my da-ge. I'll have him officially adopt you into the family proper! From now on, you're my da-ge!"

Wen Zhuliu stared in the direction of the stairs. "No need," he said.

Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng also heard what he did. The sound of footfalls echoed from the post station's stairwell, one after another.

Someone was walking up the stairs. One step at a time.

All the remaining blood in Wen Chan's burned face instantly drained away. Shaking, he extended both hands from his cloak to cover his face, as if he was scared enough to think he could protect himself by being blind to what approached. But his hands were stumps—not a single finger remained!

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The newcomer slowly ascended the stairs. Dressed entirely in black, he cut a slender figure. There was a flute hanging at his waist, and he walked with his hands clasped behind his back.

On the roof, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng gripped the hilts of their swords. The person finished making his leisurely way upstairs and turned to look at the room's occupants with a smile.

The moment Lan Wangji laid eyes on the guest's bright, handsome, and familiar face, his eyes widened in disbelief.

His lips quivered, and he mouthed a couple of words. Jiang Cheng almost sprang to his feet right then and there.

Wei Wuxian!

But aside from the face, nothing about this person resembled the Wei Wuxian they once knew.

Wei Wuxian was a bright and exuberant youth, with a hint of laughter forever at the corners of his eyes and his lips. Furthermore, he had never been one to walk so properly. This person was shrouded in gloom and biting cold. He was handsome but ghastly pale, and his smile could only be described as sinister.

The scene unfolding before their eyes was too unexpected to process. They could not act rashly, with the situation still so unclear. Though shocked beyond belief, the pair on the roof did not rush in recklessly but merely craned their necks closer to the cracks between the tiles.

Inside the room, the black-clad Wei Wuxian slowly turned around. With his face covered, Wen Chao's voice failed him and he could only wheeze out a single phrase.

"Wen Zhuliu…Wen Zhuliu!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes crinkled, and the corners of his lips slowly curved up. "Even now, you think calling him will be of any use?

As he took a few steps closer, his foot hit something white. He looked down—it was the meat bun that Wen Chao had flung away earlier.

Wei Wuxian quirked a brow. "What, are you getting picky now?"

Wen Chao collapsed to the floor from the stool and let loose a piercing screech. "I'm not eating it! I'm not eating it! I'm not eating it!"

As he wailed and shrieked, he crawled along the floor with his fingerless hands. The black cloak slid down his lower body as it dragged along the floor, revealing his legs, which hung under him like burdensome decorations. They were fully wrapped in bandages and looked abnormally thin. His violent movements tugged open gaps in the wrapping, exposing the ghastly white bones hidden beneath. There were a few lingering gobbets of flesh hanging off them, fresh with bright red blood.

His legs had been stripped raw of their flesh. And considering the evidence at hand…that flesh had likely been forced into Wen Chao's own mouth!

Wen Chao's shrill screams echoed through the empty post station. Wei Wuxian gently lifted the hem of his robe and sat down at the other table, acting like he didn't hear a thing.

The second oil lamp sputtered faintly to life. Before the bright yellow flame, half of Wei Wuxian's face lay in the light, while the other half remained in darkness. He lowered his hand, and a deathly pale face materialized from the darkness under the table. *Crunch, crunch.* They heard the sound of chewing.

A small, pale child crouched at his feet. He was gnawing on something Wei Wuxian had tossed him, like a carnivorous little beast.

Wei Wuxian reached out to give the pale child two gentle pats on his sparsely-haired head. Carrying the treat in his mouth, the ghostly child turned around and sat at Wei Wuxian's feet. He hugged Wei Wuxian's calf, chewing ferociously while glaring at Wen Zhuliu with frosty, glinting eyes.

The ghostly child was gnawing on two human fingers. Needless to say, they must have been Wen Chao's.

Staring at the sinister ghost child and the equally sinister Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji tightened his grip on Bichen's hilt.

As always, Wen Zhuliu stood before Wen Chao, shielding him. Wei Wuxian's head drooped low, making it impossible to read his expression.

"Wen Zhuliu, do you really think that you can protect his shitty life from me?"

"I will die trying," Wen Zhuliu replied.

Wei Wuxian sneered. "What a loyal Wen dog."

"I owe a debt of gratitude for their recognition," Wen Zhuliu stated. "It must not go unrepaid."

Wei Wuxian's tone and expression turned abruptly sinister. "What a joke!" he exclaimed sharply. "And why must others pay the price for *your* debt?!"

Before he finished, Wen Chao's shrill, piercing wails rang out from behind Wen Zhuliu. Wen Chao had crawled to a corner of the room and desperately pushed himself against the wooden planks, as if he could squeeze himself through the cracks by doing so. But all of a sudden, a figure dropped from the ceiling with a heavy thud. It was a ghostly pale woman with long hair who had fallen on him. The bluish tint of her bloodless face, her vibrant red robes, and jet-black hair stood in glaring, terrifying contrast to one another.

Her fingers gripped the bandages on Wen Chao's head and ripped them off hard!

Wen Zhuliu had only just changed Wen Chao's bandages after using the salve, so the salve, skin, and bandages were still damp, and stuck together as she pulled. Burned skin was fragile to begin with. This single forceful yank tore off the still-fresh scabs as well as the thin burned skin and flesh. Even his lips were ripped away. In an instant, his marred, bald head became a mangled, bloody dome.

Wen Chao fainted on the spot.

The moment Wen Zhuliu heard his blood-curdling scream, he immediately whirled around in an attempt to save him. On the roof, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng tightened their grips on their swords and prepared to attack.

However, they heard another shriek.

The ghostly child at Wei Wuxian's feet had pounced. Wen Zhuliu struck his palm at the ghostly child's forehead but was assaulted by intense pain as the ghostly child bared his sharp teeth and bit down. Unable to shake him off, Wen Zhuliu attempted to ignore the ghostly child and move to save Wen Chao, but the child spat out the large chunk of flesh it had ripped from his palm and continued to gnaw at the rest of his hand.

Wen Zhuliu grabbed the ghostly child's small, ice-cold head with his other hand, looking as if he planned to crush it. The pale-faced woman threw the bloody bandages to the ground and, falling to all fours like an animal, crawled to Wen Zhuliu in a flash. A single slash of her hands left him with ten bloody gouges.

The two nefarious creatures continued their assault, forcing Wen Zhuliu to grapple with them as they bit and tore at him incessantly. He was completely overwhelmed, and his flailing rendered him an extremely sorry sight. Turning his head, he saw Wei Wuxian watching from the sidelines with a sneer on his face. Without warning, Wen Zhuliu pounced at him.

Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng's faces fell. Lan Wangji smacked his palm down; tiles shattered and the roof collapsed. He dropped from the eaves into the second story of the post station and positioned himself between Wen Zhuliu and Wen Wuxian.

Wen Zhuliu was taken aback as a long whip crackling with purple light suddenly lashed through the air. It twisted around Wen Zhuliu's neck, winding around it a full three times before suspending him above the ground. The whip, which sizzled with lightning, dangled his heavy body in the air, swiftly followed by the crunch of his neck snapping.

At the same time, Wei Wuxian's pupils shrank. He pulled the flute from his waist and rose to his feet in a swirl of robes. The ghostly child and pale-faced woman who had been tearing at Wen Zhuliu swiftly retreated to his side and stared warily at the two strange newcomers.

Wen Zhuliu wasn't dead just yet. His face bulged and reddened, and his body spasmed. He struggled even now, his eyes open so wide his eyeballs all but burst from their sockets. The ghostly child kept baring his teeth at Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng in an open display of animosity. Wei Wuxian raised his hand slightly and bade the ghostly child retract his fangs.

His eyes darted back and forth between Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng. None of them seemed to want to be the first to speak.

After a long moment, Jiang Cheng tossed something over. Wei Wuxian raised his hand and caught it without a second thought.

"Your sword!" Jiang Cheng said.

Wei Wuxian's hand slowly dropped. He glanced down at Suibian. After a brief pause, he muttered, "…Thanks."

There was another long silence.

All of a sudden, Jiang Cheng walked up to him and smacked him. "You bastard! Where have you been for the past three months?!"

Although the words were scolding, his tone revealed his wild delight. While Lan Wangji did not go to him, his eyes remained locked on Wei Wuxian. Not once did he look away.

The smack from Jiang Cheng completely dazed Wei Wuxian. A second later, he slapped him back.

"Ha ha, it's a long story. A long story!"

The two smacks seemed to dissipate most of the cold, gloomy aura surrounding him. Despite his joy, Jiang Cheng was angry too. He hugged Wei Wuxian hard, then shoved him away and began to yell at him.

"Didn't we agree to meet at that crappy town at the foot of the mountain?! I waited for five or six days but I didn't catch a single glimpse of you! Even if you want to die, at least die in front of me! Do you know how insanely busy I've been the past three months?!"

Wei Wuxian swept away the hem of his robe and settled down again at the table. "Like I said, it's a long story." He waved dismissively. "A bunch of Wen dogs were moving earth and heaven to find me at the time. They were waiting for me at that village. They caught me, then threw me into a hellhole to suffer."

As he spoke, the pale-faced woman crawled toward him on her hands and knees. Her expression had been hideously savage while she fought but was now bewitchingly charming. Like a favored concubine ingratiating herself with her master, she giggled and kneeled by Wei Wuxian's side with her blue face pressed against his thigh. Wei Wuxian reclined against the edge of the table, his right hand stroking her long, soft hair over and over. Lan Wangji's face grew progressively grimmer as he watched Wei Wuxian's actions.

Although the scene made Jiang Cheng a little uncomfortable, his surprise overtook his discomfort. "What hellhole? I interrogated the people in town, and they all said they'd never seen you before!"

"You questioned the people in that town?" Wei Wuxian laughed. "They're all naive, rural villagers scared of inviting trouble. Why would they dare tell you the truth? Besides, the Wen dogs must've done something to seal their mouths. Of course they'd saw they never saw me."

"Those old fools!" Jiang Cheng cursed. He then probed further. "What hellhole? Qishan? Nightless City? How did you escape, then? And turn into…this. What are…what are those two things? To think they actually obey you. Lan-er-gongzi and I took on this mission to launch a night raid to kill Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu, but someone beat us to it. I never expected it to be you! Were you also the one who altered those talismans?"

From the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian caught a glimpse of Lan Wangji, who had been watching them speak. He smiled.

"More or less. Would you believe me if I said I found a mysterious cave somewhere, packed full of mysterious scrolls left behind by a mysterious master, and then emerged like this and went on a killing spree?"

Jiang Cheng clicked his tongue. "Wake up. You've read way too many fantasies. The world isn't packed with secret masters and secret caves with secret scrolls!"

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "See? You don't believe me even when I tell you. I'll explain my situation in detail later, when we have time."

Jiang Cheng glanced at Lan Wangji, guessing that it was likely something not appropriate to be discussed in the presence of an outsider. Curbing his delight, he finally said, "All right. We'll talk later. It's good to have you back."

"Mmm. Good to be back," Wei Wuxian concurred.

Jiang Cheng mumbled "good to have you back" a few more times to himself, then smacked Wei Wuxian hard again. "You really are…! To think you could escape death even after the Wen dogs caught you!"

"Of course," Wei Wuxian replied smugly. "Who do you think I am?"

Jiang Cheng couldn't help but curse. "The hell are you so smug for?! If you weren't dead, why didn't you come back earlier?!"

"I just got out, didn't I?" Wei Wuxian explained. "I heard that you and shijie were doing well and that you were rebuilding the Jiang Clan and forming an alliance to participate in the fight. And so I went to kill some Wen dogs to lighten your load and contribute a little. You've worked hard the past three months."

The last sentence made Jiang Cheng recall those three arduous months—made him recall the way he'd been constantly on the move, busy all day and all night. He seemed to get a bit emotional but immediately schooled his expression.

"Put that lousy sword of yours away properly!" he snapped. "I've been waiting for you to get back and take it off my hands. I don't want to haul two swords around all the time and constantly be bombarded with nosy questions!"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji suddenly called.

He'd been standing quietly at the side all this time. At the sudden call, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng both turned to him. It was only then that

Wei Wuxian seemed to remember to greet him. He dipped his head and did so.

“Hanguang-jun.”

“Were you the one who has been killing Wen sect disciples?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian replied.

“I knew it,” Jiang Cheng said. “Why did you kill them one at a time? That’s so much work.”

“It’s fun, toying with them until they die,” Wei Wuxian explained. “Exterminating them right away is letting them off too easily. Kill them one at a time, one slow slice after another. Force them all to watch it happen. Needless to say, I haven’t tortured Wen Chao enough yet. As for Wen Zhuliu…he owed Wen Ruohan a debt of kindness for his recognition. So much so that he changed his surname to join the Wen Clan and carried out Wen Ruohan’s orders to protect his precious little son.”

Wei Wuxian sneered.

“Since he wants to protect him, I want to make him watch all the more. Give him a front-row seat to watch Wen Chao deteriorate beyond recognition in his hands, little by little, until he becomes neither human nor ghost.”

His smile was sinister, cruel, and cheerful in equal measure. Lan Wangji took every bit of the expression in. He took a step forward.

“What method did you employ to manipulate these nefarious creatures?”

The curve of Wei Wuxian’s lips fell sharply. He looked askance at Lan Wangji.

Jiang Cheng could hear the dissent in his tone. “Lan-er-gongzi, what are you implying?”

Lan Wangji stared fixedly at Wei Wuxian. “Answer me.”

The ghostly child and pale-faced woman became restless. Wei Wuxian swept a glance at them, and they reluctantly backed off and slunk into the darkness. Only then did Wei Wuxian turn back to Lan Wangji, his brows raised.

“If I may ask…what happens if I don’t answer?”

Lan Wangji abruptly grabbed at him. Wei Wuxian evaded him and took three steps back.

“Lan Zhan, we’ve just been reunited after so long and you’re already trying to arrest me. That’s not nice, is it?”

Lan Wangji moved with his hands, not his mouth, and Wei Wuxian parried every blow he threw at him. They were both quick and agile. After the third time pushing his hand away, Wei Wuxian rebuked him harshly.

“Here I thought we could at least be considered acquaintances! Isn’t it a tad heartless of you to attack me over a simple disagreement?”

“Answer me!” Lan Wangji repeated.

Jiang Cheng stood between the two of them to intervene. “Lan-er-gongzi!”

“Lan-er-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian said. “What you’re asking is really hard to explain in a short time. And it’s a strange question, too. Suppose I asked you about the secret techniques of the Lan Clan of Gusu—would you answer me?”

Lan Wangji pushed past Jiang Cheng and made a grab for Wei Wuxian again. Wei Wuxian raised his flute to block him.

“Going a bit too far there, aren’t we? Why so uncompromising? Lan Zhan, what exactly do you want?”

Lan Wangji said, enunciating each word as clearly as he could, “Return to Gusu with me.”

Both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were taken aback.

After a moment, Wei Wuxian said with a laugh, “Return to Gusu with you? To the Cloud Recesses? Whatever for?” It immediately dawned on him. “Oh, right. I forgot. Your uncle Lan Qiren absolutely hates unorthodox heretics like me. You’re his favorite pupil, so of course you’re the same, ha ha. Well, no thanks.”

Jiang Cheng stared warily at Lan Wangji. “Lan-er-gongzi, everyone knows the ways of the Lan Clan. However, Wei Wuxian saved you in the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave at Mount Muxi. He’s been through adversity with you. Isn’t it a tad unreasonable of you to mercilessly condemn him right now?”

Wei Wuxian looked at him. “Not bad, huh? You’ve got the air of a family head.”

“You shut up,” Jiang Cheng said.

“Condemnation is not my intent,” Lan Wangji stated.

“Then why do you want him to return to Gusu with you?” Jiang Cheng questioned. “Lan-er-gongzi, does the Lan Clan of Gusu intend to insist on its archaic doctrines right here and right now? Rather than working with everyone to kill the Wen dogs?”

One against two. Lan Wangji nevertheless stood his ground and gazed at Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Ying, you will eventually have to pay the price for cultivating along a deviant path. There have been no exceptions to this rule throughout history.”

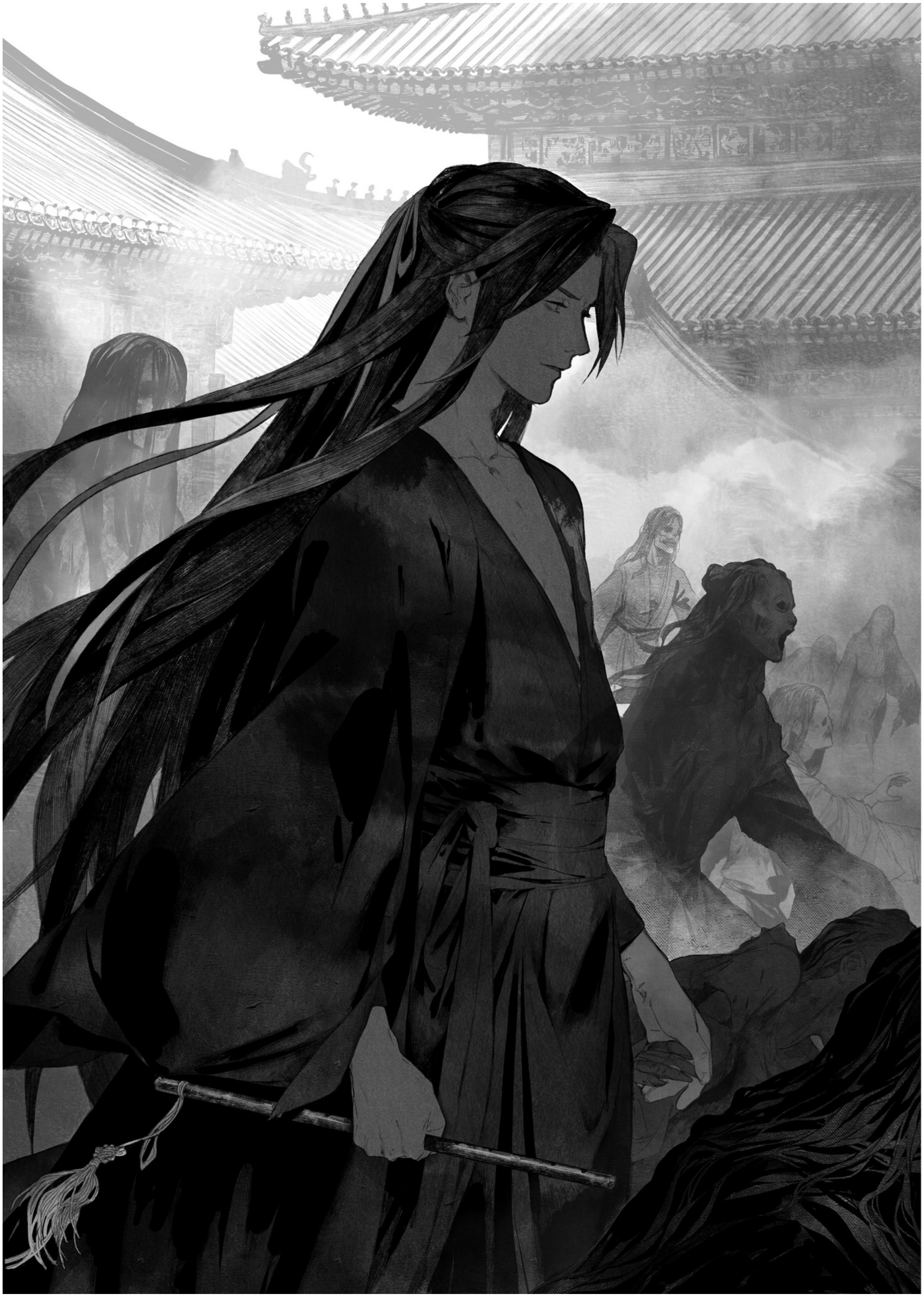
“I can afford it,” Wei Wuxian replied.

Seeing his nonchalance, Lan Wangji said darkly, “That path injures the body. And more so, one’s nature.”

“I know best whether or not it harms my body and by how much,” Wei Wuxian declared. “And as for my nature, I’m the master of my own heart. I know what I’m doing.”

“Some things are simply beyond your control,” Lan Wangji persisted.

A hint of displeasure flashed across Wei Wuxian’s face. “Of course I can control it.”



Lan Wangji took a step closer and was about to speak again, but Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes.

"What do others know of my nature? And how is that anyone else's business?"

Lan Wangji was stunned for a moment, then exclaimed angrily, "… *Wei Wuxian!"*

"Lan Wangji!" Wei Wuxian was angry as well. "Must you come at me like this right now? You want me to go to the Cloud Recesses and be confined by the Lan Clan as punishment? Who do you think you are? What do you think the Lan Clan is?! Do you really think I won't fight back?!"

An air of hostility had erupted between the two. Lan Wangji gripped Bichen's hilt so hard his knuckles had turned white.

"Lan-er-gongzi," Jiang Cheng said icily. "The Wens have not been eradicated yet. We're at a point where we urgently need extra forces. Everyone already has their hands full, so why reach *your* hand into the affairs of others? Wei Wuxian is on our side. Are you trying to punish our own people?"

Wei Wuxian regained his composure. "That's right. As long as the Wen dogs are killed, what do you care about how I kill them?"

Ever since they were children, they would chime in with whatever the other was saying. And here they were again, flawlessly filling in for each other.

"Pardon my bluntness, but even if we were to pursue the matter, Wei Wuxian isn't a member of your clan. It's not the Lan Clan's place to punish him," Jiang Cheng added. "Of all the people he might go back with, it won't be with you."

At this, Lan Wangji's expression froze. He glanced up at Wei Wuxian, his throat trembling as he swallowed. "I…"

Before he could reply, Wen Chao let loose a feeble scream from the corner. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng's attention immediately shifted. They simultaneously stepped around Lan Wangji and came to stand before Wen Zhuliu and Wen Chao.

Wen Zhuliu was still suspended in the air by Zidian and struggling in miserable agony, while Wen Chao, more dead than alive, slowly opened his eyes to see the two faces looking down on him from above.

The two faces were both similarly young and similarly familiar. Both had once shown him expressions of despair, anguish, or deep-seated hatred. And now they looked commandingly down at him with similarly cold, glinting eyes, bearing similarly ominous sneers.

Wen Chao stopped trying to scream or escape. He dumbly held up his fingerless hands and began to drool. Wei Wuxian kicked him into kneeling in the direction of Yunmeng. His exposed flesh and bones chafed against one another, causing Wen Chao to emit shrill shrieks of pain that sounded particularly jarring in the empty post station.

“Why is his voice so shrill?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“He’s missing a certain body part,” Wei Wuxian answered. “Of course it’s shrill.”

“You cut it off?” Jiang Cheng wondered in revulsion.

“It’s a bit gross that you assumed that,” Wei Wuxian commented. “Of course I didn’t. That woman of his bit it off when she went mad.”

Lan Wangji was still standing behind them, watching. Wei Wuxian suddenly remembered his presence and turned around with a smile.

“The following scene may not be suitable for Lan-er-gongzi’s eyes. Won’t you please step away for a moment?”

Although he said “please,” his tone brooked no argument.

Jiang Cheng agreed with polite and professional detachment. “Indeed. Lan-er-gongzi, Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu have fallen into our hands. The mission is accomplished. It’s time we part ways. What comes next is a family matter. It’s best if you head back.”

Lan Wangji’s gaze was still locked on Wei Wuxian, but Wei Wuxian’s attention had been captured by his enemies, who were now at death’s door. He stared at Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu with gleaming eyes, and his smile was both cruel and excited. Jiang Cheng wore the same expression. They had lost themselves in the overwhelming pleasure of revenge, and neither was in the mood to placate an outsider.

After a while, Lan Wangji turned around and headed downstairs. He stepped out of the post station and kept watch by the entrance for a long time, but he never left.

Some time later, a long, shrill howl pierced the silent night.

Lan Wangji looked up. His white robe and forehead ribbon flapped in the frigid wind.

The black night had passed, and the sun in the sky was about to rise.

And the sun on earth was about to set.

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Chapter 14:
Soft

— Part 1 —

"LAN ZHAN…" Wei Wuxian murmured.

He reached out and grabbed one of Lan Zhan's sleeves. Lan Wangji, who had been keeping watch by his side, immediately leaned over to answer him softly.

"I am here."

Wei Wuxian was not quite awake. His eyes were tightly shut, but his grip on Lan Wangji did not loosen. He seemed to be dreaming and mumbling in his sleep.

"…Don't…don't be mad…"

Lan Wangji was slightly taken aback. In a gentle voice, he replied, "I am not."

"…Oh," Wei Wuxian murmured. He seemed to be reassured by hearing that and released his grip.

Lan Wangji sat down by Wei Wuxian's side. When Wei Wuxian had stilled once more, he made to get up but was stopped by Wei Wuxian grabbing hold of him again.

Wei Wuxian clung to his arm and pleaded urgently, "I'll return with you. Hurry up and take me back home with you!"

Lan Wangji's eyes widened.

Wei Wuxian seemed to have woken himself up with that shout. His long lashes fluttered, and he slowly opened his eyes. The dazed

confusion in his eyes gradually cleared, and he suddenly realized he was clinging to Lan Wangji with both arms like he were a lifeline, or driftwood in water.

He immediately withdrew his hands and made to roll away, but the exaggerated movement aggravated the wound on his abdomen. He muttered an “ouch” and wrinkled his brow, only now remembering that he was still wounded. His vision flared with sparks from the pain, and faces flashed before his eyes: Jin Ling, Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, Jiang Fengmian, Madam Yu…

Lan Wangji held him down to steady him. “Your stomach wound?”

“Wound? I’m fine, it doesn’t hurt…”

Lan Wangji firmly held him down and loosened his robes. His abdomen had been properly bandaged, but Lan Wangji unraveled them to check the injuries beneath. Surprisingly enough, the wound had already healed. When Lan Wangji checked his leg, the curse mark there had vanished as well.

“How long have I been out?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji released him only after confirming that his wound was indeed fine.

“Four days.”

Jin Ling’s aim had been unerring. And the wound hadn’t been shallow either. That the injury had healed without leaving the slightest scar was all thanks to the top-grade medicinal pills of the Lan Clan.

Wei Wuxian gave his thanks and followed up with a self-deprecating jibe. “I might have been reborn, but this new body is so fragile. One little stab and I’m laid low.”

“Anyone would be laid low if they were run through by a sword,” Lan Wangji replied evenly.

“Not necessarily,” Wei Wuxian stated. “Had I been in my old body, even if half of my intestines were hanging out, I’d be able to stuff ’em back in and continue brawling for another three hundred rounds.”

Seeing him spouting such nonsense so soon after waking, Lan Wangji shook his head. He turned away, and assuming he was going to leave, Wei Wuxian quickly called for him.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan! Don’t go. I was babbling nonsense, my bad. Don’t ignore me.”

"You are afraid of being ignored?"

"Yes, yes."

It'd been a long time since he last experienced someone watching over him as he slept off an injury.

Lan Wangji wore two swords at his waist. He removed Suibian and handed it to him.

"Your sword."

Wei Wuxian was briefly taken aback at the sight of the sword. After a pause, he said, "Thank you."

He grasped the hilt and slowly drew the shining blade, which reflected a pair of eyes. Wei Wuxian stared at the pair of eyes for a moment, then inserted Suibian back into its sheath.

"Did it really seal itself off?"

Lan Wangji also grasped the hilt of Suibian and pulled, but it didn't budge in the slightest. Wei Wuxian sighed and patted the sword.

I knew it. Jin Guangyao wouldn't dare make something like that up without thinking it through… I can't believe it really sealed itself off. I just had to be the one to experience this kind of one-in-a-million event. Just great. This is conclusive evidence—whoever pulls out the sword must be Wei Wuxian, period. I couldn't deny it even if I wanted to.

He looked around. They were in a simple, tidy room lit only by a single paper lantern in a corner.

"Where is this?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"The Cloud Recesses," Lan Wangji replied.

"You took me back to the Cloud Recesses? What if your brother finds out?"

"I already have."

A man dressed in white and wearing a forehead ribbon walked out from behind the screen. His face was like beautiful jade, and his expression was solemn.

Wei Wuxian had yet to be arrested by the Jin Clan of Lanling despite spending four days recuperating in the Cloud Recesses, so it could be reasonably assumed Lan Xichen didn't pose a threat. Also, Lan Wangji was by his side, so Wei Wuxian wasn't wary.

He suddenly recalled an important matter. "Where is Chifeng-zun's body?"

"The sects all saw da-ge's body with their own eyes," Lan Xichen said. "At present, it is in Huaisang's custody. I have also sent people I can trust to look after it."

Wei Wuxian felt slightly reassured. "And Jin Guangyao's reaction?"

"Flawless," Lan Wangji confirmed.

Wei Wuxian had known that Jin Guangyao would put on a perfect act. It wasn't worth worrying about, as long as there was no way he could destroy the body to get rid of the evidence.

"He said he will get to the bottom of the matter and that he will provide us all with an explanation," Lan Xichen stated slowly. "And since Wei-gongzi has now come around…Wangji, should you not provide me with an explanation as well?"

Lan Wangji rose to his feet. "Xiongzhang."

Lan Xichen heaved a long sigh. "Wangji, what am I to do with you?"

"Xiongzhang," Lan Wangji said. "It is a fact that Chifeng-zun's head is in Jin Guangyao's possession."

"You personally saw it?" Lan Xichen asked.

"He did."

"You believe him?" Lan Xichen asked.

"I do."

Lan Wangji answered without the slightest hint of hesitation. Wei Wuxian felt warmth bloom in his heart.

"Then," Lan Xichen asked, "what about Jin Guangyao?"

"He is untrustworthy," Lan Wangji stated.

Lan Xichen chuckled.

“And how do you judge a person to be trustworthy, Wangji?”

He looked at Wei Wuxian.

“You trust Wei-gongzi, but I trust Jin Guangyao. Neither of us personally witnessed whether da-ge’s head is in his possession. We rely entirely on our own understanding of another, our own trust in their words. You think you understand Wei Wuxian, and that is why you trust him. I also think I understand Jin Guangyao and therefore trust him. You trust your own judgment. Why can I not trust my own judgment too?”

Wei Wuxian, worried that the two brothers would quarrel because of this, quickly interjected, “Sect Leader Lan!”

It wasn’t that he couldn’t understand Lan Xichen’s feelings. He had seen Jin Guangyao from Nie Mingjue’s perspective and witnessed all his treachery, cunning, and ambition. But if Jin Guangyao had worn a mask in front of Lan Xichen for all these years, then there was no reason for Lan Xichen to distrust his own sworn brother in favor of someone who was notorious for bloody deeds.

Lan Xichen nodded. “Wei-gongzi, there’s no need for you to worry. I will not be partial to any one side until the truth is uncovered, nor will I reveal your whereabouts. Otherwise, I would not have allowed Wangji to bring you to my Wintry Room or helped treat your injuries.”

“Many thanks to Sect Leader Lan for giving me a chance,” Wei Wuxian said. “Chifeng-zun’s head is in Jin Guangyao’s secret chamber—that’s the honest truth. Not only did I see the head, but I was also assaulted by its aura of resentment and saw some *other* stuff in the process. I wonder if any of that could be considered proof?”

With composure, Lan Xichen said, “Wei-gongzi, perhaps you did indeed see some…things. But you cannot prove that you saw them in the secret chamber of Golden Carp Tower.”

“That’s true.” Wei Wuxian grunted. “Then lemme say something else. Chifeng-zun’s direct cause of death certainly was qi deviation, but Sect Leader Lan, don’t you think the timing was too great a coincidence? The saber spirit’s influence is one thing, but did you ever consider that there could be other causes behind it?”

“And what might those causes be, do you think?” Lan Xichen asked.

"A spiritual song of purification," Wei Wuxian said.

"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen said, "are you aware that I personally taught Jin Guangyao how to play that song of purification?"

"In that case, I'd like to ask Sect Leader Lan to listen and see if there's anything off about this melody."

His flute was right there at the head of the bed, so Wei Wuxian picked it up. He lowered his head and thought for a moment before he began to play.

Once the song was over, he asked, "Sect Leader Lan, is this really the song you taught Jin Guangyao?"

"It is," Lan Xichen confirmed.

Wei Wuxian was a little surprised, but he kept his cool. "What's it called?"

"This piece is called 'Cleansing,'" Lan Xichen answered. "It can purify the heart and calm the mind."

"Cleansing," Wei Wuxian echoed. "I've listened to plenty of famous songs from around the cultivation world, so why have I never heard this name or its melody before?"

"The piece is obscure," Lan Wangji said, "and difficult to learn."

"Precisely," Lan Xichen agreed.

"Did Jin Guangyao specifically ask to learn this piece?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Correct," Lan Xichen confirmed.

"Is it really that hard to learn?" Wei Wuxian wondered. "Then why did Jin Guangyao pick it and not something easier?"

"Because I told him that even though Cleansing is hard to learn, it is of the utmost effectiveness," Lan Xichen explained. "And yes, the piece is indeed tricky. Did Wei-gongzi not just play one of the sections incorrectly?"

Something clicked in Wei Wuxian's mind when he heard this. "I played it wrong?"

“There was a section in the middle that was incorrect,” Lan Wangji confirmed.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Nah. It wasn’t me who was wrong—it was Jin Guangyao! That was definitely what he played during the assault of resentful energy. I guarantee you that I replayed *that* version without a single mistake.”

Lan Xichen was astonished. “Then he was the one who learned it wrong? That…is impossible.”

“That’s true indeed,” Wei Wuxian said. “Lianfang-zun is awfully smart and has an excellent memory. How could he have misremembered the melody? I’m afraid it’s most likely intentional. I’ll play it again. Sect Leader Lan, Hanguang-jun, this time, please listen carefully to the ‘incorrect’ bit.”

He played the song again. When he neared the end of the second section, Lan Wangji said, “Stop.”

“It is the section you just played,” Lan Xichen said.

Wei Wuxian withdrew the flute from his lips. “Really? It doesn’t sound out of place to me.”

“It certainly is not discordant,” Lan Xichen agreed, “but it does not form part of Cleansing.”

If it had been an ordinary mistake, it would not have blended so seamlessly with the rest of the original melody, like milk in water. This particular revision must have been deliberately polished before its inclusion. And the unfamiliar melody that had crept its way into Cleansing was very possibly the key to Nie Mingjue’s death.

Lan Xichen thought for a moment, then said, “Both of you, come with me.”

As they stepped out of the house, Wei Wuxian was slightly taken aback.

It was a small and secluded cottage located in some hidden corner of the Cloud Recesses. The Lan Clan’s residence was situated deep in the mountains, and its territory was capped by towering pine trees. Most of the scenery consisted of lush green trees and eupatorium grass. There *were* some flowers, but they were all simple, elegant varieties such as magnolias, gardenias, and white chrysanthemums—and even then, they were rare and fleeting sights, serving mainly as occasional ornaments.

But the area around this cottage was abundant with purple gentians. The flowers were dainty and delicate, and their color was vivid and captivating, capable of ensnaring the hearts of all who wandered there. They seemed to emit a faint glow under the night's dark sky. The sight was beautiful, like a dream, an illusion.

Wei Wuxian felt there must be something special about this place, but he was only able to take a quick glance, not examine it in detail. Hai time had already passed, and most of the Cloud Recesses had retired for the night. It was incomparably still and silent, and as Lan Xichen led them to the Library Pavilion, they did not encounter a single soul.

The Cloud Recesses had once been burnt to the ground. While this Library Pavilion was no longer the one of the past, its layout was no different from the original after its reconstruction. Even the magnolia tree outside the pavilion had been planted anew.

The three entered the pavilion, and Wei Wuxian voiced his doubt.

"Sect Leader Lan, can we find the source of that melody here?"

"Not here," Lan Xichen said. He walked to a particular row of bookshelves and crouched down to lift a mat that covered a wooden panel. "…But here, yes."

A secret door lay beneath the wooden panel.

"The Room of Forbidden Books," Lan Wangji explained.

Under the secret door was a dark staircase that went on for more than fifty steps. The three descended the dark steps, and a dry, spacious underground stone chamber materialized before Wei Wuxian's eyes. The sound of their footsteps resonated hollowly. Rows and rows of bookshelves towered in the Room of Forbidden Books. Sorted, dusty books lay sparsely on the shelves; it was clear no one had flipped through them for many years.

Lan Xichen brought them to a particular shelf. "All the books in this section are records of unusual musical scores."

There was a single desk in the Room of Forbidden Books, which had only one paper lamp on it. Lan Wangji took the papers and brushes that had been untouched for many years from the shelf and made three copies of the score for the altered section of Cleansing from memory. The three of them sat around the desk and divided the work, with each responsible for a few dozen books. Book after book, page after page, they compared the melodies listed in the forbidden books to the transcribed section, looking for anything that matched.

After four hours, the three had still not found anything that matched that section of the song. In other words, they were unsuccessful in finding its source.

As Wei Wuxian quickly scanned the scores, he thought, *Don't tell me there's no record of this song, even in the music section of the Lan Library Pavilion's Room of Forbidden Books? That can't be. If even the Lan Clan doesn't have it in their collection, it's impossible anyone else would have it.*

Jin Guangyao couldn't have composed his own magical melody, could he? It'll be a pain if that's the case. Unless we can find someone to test it by listening to it for months straight, we won't be able to prove there's anything fishy about it. But although he's clever, he was never trained in this kind of thing. He can't have been clever enough to compose his own…

After having stared at tiny, tightly packed words for so long, Wei Wuxian's vision was getting a little blurry. He had several books still left in his stack, so he planned on coming back to them after he took a short break.

Lan Wangji had already finished reviewing his own pile. He quietly took the books that Wei Wuxian had set aside and lowered his head as he continued to flip through them.

Lan Xichen witnessed this scene when he glanced up. He seemed to want to say something but ultimately held himself back.

Just then, Lan Wangji said, "This one."

He passed over the book he held. Wei Wuxian promptly perked up. He eagerly looked over the two pages Lan Wangji had presented to him, comparing it to the fragmentary score in his hands.

"…It's not the same at all?"

Lan Wangji moved to sit down beside him and point out the detail he'd spotted. "Consider these pages in sequence."

With their heads so close together, Lan Wangji's voice was right next to his ear, low and magnetic. Wei Wuxian's hand trembled slightly, and the book nearly slipped from his grip. With some difficulty, he collected himself and forced himself to tear his eyes away from Lan Wangji's long, fair, slender fingers.

He carefully compared the pages before him. "Oh. The front and back."

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything strange about the pages. But if those familiar with music were to pay close attention, they would notice that the tune on one page did not connect to the tune on the next.

Wei Wuxian took out his flute and followed along with the score. Sure enough, the two melodies were disconnected: the half score on the previous page did not belong to the same piece as the half score on the next.

There should've been another page between these two. Someone had very carefully torn it out without leaving any traces behind. The removal had been extremely meticulous—not a single shred of the page remained, making it difficult to notice.

Wei Wuxian flipped the book over to see its title. Four words marked the book's dark blue cover.

He read the title aloud. "*Collection of Spirit Turmoil*?[5] What is this book? The pieces in here sound a little weird."

"A collection of secret songs from Dongying," Lan Wangji explained.

"From Dongying?" Wei Wuxian echoed. "No wonder they don't sound like anything from over here."

Lan Xichen wore a complicated expression. "…It has been said that the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil* was compiled by a disciple of the Lan Clan of Gusu during his years spent wandering Dongying after drifting there by boat. It is a collection of wicked songs. If one were to infuse spiritual energy into any of the pieces in this book while playing them, the songs could be used to do harm to others. One could make them waste away, drive them to irascible moods, agitate their vital energy, lose their five senses… Those possessing great spiritual power could even end a person’s life within seven notes.”

Wei Wuxian smacked the desk. “This is it!”

In his moment of joy, the blow almost knocked over the paper lantern on the desk. A keen-eyed Lan Wangji deftly caught it in time.

“Sect Leader Lan, is there a song in the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil* that can disturb someone’s mind, agitate their primordial spirit, unsettle their vital energy, and make them easily prone to anger?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“…There should be,” Lan Xichen granted.

“Jin Guangyao’s spiritual power isn’t high enough to take someone’s life within seven notes, and that method is far too conspicuous anyway. He wouldn’t choose a song that kills directly.” Wei Wuxian worked out his thoughts aloud. “But if he spent three straight months playing spiritual purification music under the pretext of helping Chifeng-zun calm his mind…then is it possible for such a song to act as a catalyst for Chifeng-zun’s eventual outburst, like a slow-acting poison?”

“…Yes,” Lan Xichen answered.

“Then,” Wei Wuxian continued, “my deduction makes sense. The section that didn’t belong to Cleansing came from the lost page of the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil*. All the wicked songs of Dongying documented in the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil* are complicated and hard to learn. He didn’t have time to copy it out in the Room of Forbidden Books, so he had no other option but to tear—no, that’s not right. Jin Guangyao can memorize something with a single glance. He tore the page out not because he wouldn’t be able to recall it but because he didn’t want to leave proof behind. To ensure that, if his scheme was unraveled one day or if he was caught red-handed, there would be no way to determine the song’s origin.

“Everything he’s ever done, he’s done with extreme caution. He played the real version of Cleansing when you were present. Chifeng-zun wasn’t a man who was interested in artistic pursuits, but he had a basic impression of the melody from hearing Sect Leader Lan play it. Because of that, Jin Guangyao didn’t dare play the wicked song outright. Instead, he went to significant trouble to fuse two tunes with very different styles and completely opposite effects. To think he could knit them into a seamless whole—his musical talent is outstanding! My guess is that he infused very little spiritual energy when playing Cleansing but went all out when he got to the bit from the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil*. Chifeng-zun wasn't familiar with this cultivation technique. He would never have been able to tell that Cleansing had been altered by Jin Guangyao into a deadly, diabolical ditty!"

After a long stretch of silence, Lan Xichen said quietly, "…Although he frequents the Cloud Recesses, I have never told him of the Library Pavilion's Room of Forbidden Books."

"Sect Leader Lan," Wei Wuxian said. "Excuse me for being blunt, but Lianfang-zun was an undercover agent in the Wen Clan of Qishan's Nightless City during the Sunshot Campaign. And an exceptional one, at that. He was able to find Wen Ruohan's secret chamber and sneak into it unnoticed to memorize all the maps and records there, then transcribe the information from memory to send back to Golden Carp Tower. To him, the Lan Library Pavilion's Room of Forbidden Books really is…nothing."

Lan Xichen stared at the fragmented melody in his hand for a moment, then said, "I…will think of a way to test this."

"Xiongzhang?" Lan Wangji asked.

"When da-ge passed away, the Siege of the Burial Mounds had already concluded and Wei-gongzi was no longer with us," Lan Xichen said. "If the tests prove your deductions to be true and not a fabrication, if they prove this fragmented score is capable of disturbing the mind, I…"

"Zewu-jun," Wei Wuxian said, "testing a wicked song on a living person probably goes against the Lan Clan's precepts."

"I will test it on myself," Lan Xichen stated.

As the head of the Lan Clan of Gusu, to say something so preposterous made it obvious his mind was in turmoil.

Lan Wangji raised his voice slightly. "Xiongzhang!"

Lan Xichen pressed his hand to his forehead.

"Wangji," he said quietly, sounding pained. "The Jin Guangyao I know is a completely different person from the Jin Guangyao the two of you know—and the Jin Guangyao the rest of the world knows! All these years, he has always…suffered in silence to do his duty. He cares about all living beings. He is respectful of his superiors and compassionate to his subordinates. I have always firmly believed that the world's denunciation of him is born from misunderstanding and that the person I know is the real him. You want me to believe that everything this man has shown me has been a lie? That he plotted to kill one of his own sworn brothers and that I was a pawn in his scheme, who even lent him a helping hand… Would you please allow me the chance to exercise some prudence before passing judgment?"

Lan Xichen had been mindful of the bad blood between Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangyao, wanting them to bury the hatchet and reconcile. That was why he had taught Jin Guangyao purification music and asked him to calm Nie Mingjue's heart and mind on his behalf. Who could possibly have predicted that his good intentions would play into Jin Guangyao's schemes? How was he to live with himself?

The three did not speak again. It was only after they left the Library Pavilion that Lan Wangji broke the silence.

"I will go see shufu."

Lan Xichen had been quiet but replied to this. "I will take Wei-gongzi back. You may join us later."

He led Wei Wuxian along the Cloud Recesses' white stone paths back to the small, remote, gentian-surrounded cottage deep in the recesses of the clouds.

"Does Lan-xiansheng know that Hanguang-jun…" Wei Wuxian asked when they reached the door.

"Shufu has only just awoken," Lan Xichen replied. "I instructed everyone not to tell him too much."

If Lan Qiren found out what he and Lan Wangji had done at Golden Carp Tower, he'd surely be rendered comatose with fury once more after only just waking.

"It's been tough on Lan-lao-qianbei," Wei Wuxian said.

“It has indeed been tough on shufu.” Lan Xichen agreed. Out of the blue, he asked, “Wei-gongzi, do you know what this house is?”

“Why does Zewu-jun think I’d know?” Wei Wuxian asked curiously.

Lan Xichen glanced at him. “This was once my mother’s residence in the Cloud Recesses.”

Of course, his mother was Lan Wangji’s mother too. Wei Wuxian found this rather strange. The heads of the Lan Clan of Gusu traditionally took the Wintry Room as their residence, which was a far cry from this small cottage tucked away in a nook of the Cloud Recesses. Could it be that Lan Wangji’s parents lived separately because they were like Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu—an incompatible pair in a forced marriage?

No matter how you considered it, there couldn’t have been a pleasant reason for why the family head and mistress didn’t live together. The wife of Qingheng-jun—the previous head of the Lan Clan of Gusu—was said to have been frail and perpetually in a convalescent state, which made it inadvisable for her to host guests. People knew very little about her to begin with, and so everyone privately speculated that this “illness” might be a front for something too disgraceful to be seen in public, such as a disfigurement or disability.

As such, it wasn’t Wei Wuxian’s place to pry. He held his tongue and waited for Lan Xichen to speak on his own terms.

“Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen started, “you are probably aware that my father was in seclusion year-round and paid no attention to the affairs of the secular world. The Lan Clan of Gusu was managed by my shufu almost single-handedly all those years.”

“That I know,” Wei Wuxian confirmed.

Lan Xichen lowered the hand holding Liebing. Both disappeared under the white sleeve. “It was because of my mother that my father was in seclusion year-round,” he continued slowly. “Rather than calling this place a residence…one might well call it a prison.”

Wei Wuxian was stunned.

Qingheng-jun, the father of Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun, was once a renowned cultivator with an impressive reputation. He made a name for himself in his youth, but when he came of age at twenty, he suddenly abandoned all his pursuits, announced his marriage, and stopped concerning himself with the affairs of the secular world. While the official reason put forward was seclusion, it was in truth more like retirement. Many potential reasons were discussed in gossip, but none had ever been confirmed.

Lan Xichen leaned down to a gentian bush and gently stroked the thin, delicate petals.

“My father encountered my mother in his youth outside the city of Gusu on the way back from a Night Hunt.” He smiled. “Apparently, it was love at first sight.”

Wei Wuxian smiled as well. “Young people are a romantic bunch.”

“But she did not reciprocate his feelings,” Lan Xichen continued. “And then she killed one of my father’s mentors.”

This was completely beyond imagining. Wei Wuxian knew it was rude to probe further, but when he considered that these were Lan Wangji’s parents, he felt he had to ask. “Why?!”

“I do not know,” Lan Xichen admitted. “But I suppose it must come down to the debts of gratitude and grudges between them.”

It would be inappropriate to keep prying. Wei Wuxian forced down his curiosity. “So…what happened after that?”

“After that,” Lan Xichen resumed, “when my father learned the truth, he was naturally anguished. But after much struggle, he nonetheless secretly brought her back here. Disregarding the clan’s objections, not speaking so much as a word to them, he bowed to the Heavens and the Earth with her in wedding rites. He then told everyone in the clan that she was his wife for life, and that anyone who wanted to lay a finger on her had to first pass through him.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened.

“Once the ceremony concluded, my father found a cottage and confined my mother within,” Lan Xichen continued. “He then found another place for himself and confined himself in turn. He called it seclusion, but in truth, it was self-reflection.”

He asked, after a brief pause, “Wei-gongzi, can you understand his actions?”

Wei Wuxian was quiet for a moment before he offered an answer. “He couldn’t bring himself to forgive the murderer who killed his mentor, and he couldn’t bring himself to watch the woman he loved die. He married her to save her life and then forced himself to be apart from her.”

“Do you think that was the right thing to do?” Lan Xichen asked.

“I don’t know.”

Lan Xichen appeared slightly at a loss. “Then what *do* you think was the right thing to do?”

“I don’t know.”

After a while, Lan Xichen said quietly, “It could be said that my father completely disregarded the consequences of his actions. The clan elders were enraged, but they had all watched him grow up. In the end, there was nothing they could do but keep it a secret and hint to outsiders that the mistress of the Lan Clan of Gusu had an unmentionable illness and was thus indisposed to host guests. When Wangji and I were born, they immediately removed us and put us in the care of others. Once we were old enough, we were handed over to our shufu to be taught and raised.

“My shufu…is frank and upright by nature. Because my mother’s crimes caused my father to destroy his own life, he came to particularly loathe those who behaved with such disregard. For that reason, he was particularly strict when raising Wangji and I. We could only see our mother once a month in this little cottage.”

Every day, those two young children had faced their stern shufu, strict teachings, and mountains of books. No matter how tired or weary they were, they had to keep their young backs straight and be the most exemplary juniors in the family. Role models in the eyes of others.

They were forbidden from growing up alongside their closest kin. They couldn’t horse around in their father’s arms, they couldn’t be cuddled and spoiled by their mother’s embrace.

But the two children had clearly done nothing wrong.

“Every time Wangji and I visited her, she never complained about how dreary it was to be so confined, with her freedom so restricted,” Lan Xichen said. “And she never asked about our studies. She particularly loved to tease Wangji, but you know him, of course—the more you tease him, the more he clams up and the sourer his face gets. He has always been that way, ever since he was a child. However…” He chuckled. “…Although Wangji never said as much, I knew he spent every month waiting for the day he got to see Mother. That was how he was. That was how I was.”

Wei Wuxian imagined a young Lan Wangji being held in his mother’s embrace, with his little snow-white face flushed pink. He laughed as well, but before their laughter dispersed, Lan Xichen continued his tale.

“But one day, shufu told us that we need not go anymore. Mother was gone.”

“How old was Lan Zhan at the time?” Wei Wuxian asked quietly.

“Six,” Lan Xichen replied. “He was too young to understand what ‘gone’ meant. No matter how much others consoled him or how shufu scolded him, he continued to come here every month and sit under the veranda, waiting for someone to open the door. Even when he grew older and came to understand that Mother would never come back, that no one would ever open the door again, he would still come.”

Lan Xichen stood up, his dark eyes staring directly at Wei Wuxian. “Wangji has always been very stubborn, ever since he was young.”

Leaves rustled. The congregation of gentians around the cottage swayed affectionately with the wind. Wei Wuxian’s gaze landed on the wooden veranda of the small cottage. He could almost see a young child in a forehead ribbon sitting all prim and proper in front of the house, waiting in silence for the door to open.

“Madam Lan must have been a very gentle woman,” he said.

“The mother in my memories was certainly so,” Lan Xichen said. “I do not know her reasons for having committed such a deed back then, and in fact, I…” He inhaled deeply and then confessed, “…I have no wish to know.”

After a long silence, Lan Xichen lowered his eyes and took out Liebing. A gust of night wind elicited a murmur from the xiao, low and heavy, like a sigh.

Wei Wuxian had heard Lan Xichen play Liebing before. The sound of the xiao was just like Zewu-jun himself, like spring breeze melting into rain—warm and gentle and refined. While the music was as exquisite as ever, it left a bitter taste in one's mouth.

The night breeze gently caressed them. Lan Xichen's black hair was already a little disheveled, and his forehead ribbon slightly askew, but the head of the Lan Clan of Gusu—who was always mindful of his deportment—took no notice. It was only when his song concluded that he put down Liebing.

"Playing music late at night is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses. I have stepped out of line and made a mockery of myself before Wei-gongzi many times tonight."

"No big deal," Wei Wuxian assured him. "Has Zewu-jun forgotten that the one who's violated the most rules of all stands before you now…?"

Lan Xichen chuckled. "The Lan Clan of Gusu has never revealed my or Wangji's past to the public. I should not have told you, but I had the urge to pour my heart out tonight and did so on impulse."

"I'm not the gossipy sort," Wei Wuxian stated. "So Zewu-jun, you can rest assured."

"Nevertheless, I suppose Wangji would not hide anything from you either," Lan Xichen idly observed.

"If he isn't willing to say, I won't ask," Wei Wuxian said.

"But given Wangji's personality, how will he say anything if you *do not* ask?" Lan Xichen pressed him. "And there are some things that he will not say even if you do."

Wei Wuxian was about to reply when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw Lan Wangji walk over, bathed in moonlight. In his right hand were two round wine jugs with bright red seals.

Wei Wuxian's eyes lit up. "Hanguang-jun, you're too sweet!"

Lan Wangji approached and handed the jugs of Emperor's Smile to him. Wei Wuxian pranced into the cottage with the jugs in his arms, and

Lan Wangji shook his head at his retreating back, though his gaze was extremely gentle.

Lan Xichen glanced at him. “You brought them over from your room?”

Lan Wangji nodded.

“You…had best not touch alcohol,” Lan Xichen advised. “Be careful not to end up as you did back then.”

His eyes fell upon the fold of clothing near Lan Wangji’s collarbone. Lan Wangji lowered his head to glance at his chest.

“It will not happen again.”

Lan Xichen forced a smile, then heaved another sigh.

After Lan Xichen left, Lan Wangji entered the room and gently closed the door. As Wei Wuxian removed the seal on the wine jug, he mulled over the story of the founder of the Lan Clan of Gusu, Lan An, as well as that of Qingheng-jun.

The Lan Clan really is an enigmatic bunch. Although the founder was a monk and their family traditions are so rigid, they really breed some…die-hard romantics.

Now possessed of such hindsight, he couldn’t help but look at the other Lan descendant in the room.

Lan Wangji was reading a book with his head down. A paper lamp stood at the corner of his desk. The soft glow made his face all the more handsome, giving a tint of warmth to his cool, detached expression and light eyes. He was so dashing, so refined, that he seemed ethereal. Wei Wuxian was spellbound and mesmerized. He inched closer, unable to help himself.

Lan Wangji looked up. “What is it?”

Wei Wuxian swiftly returned to his senses. “Nothing. Your bookmark’s really pretty.”

Lan Wangji’s bookmark was a pale dried flower. It was extremely well preserved, the colors still vivid and the veins on its petals so delicately textured that it still looked alive. It gave off a sweet and subtle fragrance as it lay between the pages. Wei Wuxian picked up the bookmark.

“A peony?”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji answered in the affirmative.

Wei Wuxian fiddled with the bookmark a bit before returning it to him. “That was quite the blow your gege received.”

Lan Wangji carefully placed the peony back between the pages and closed the book. “Should he find evidence, he will not condone the crime.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian said. “He’s *your* gege after all.”

No matter how close Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao were, Lan Xichen was still a member of the Lan Clan of Gusu and had his principles.

Wei Wuxian opened a wine jug. *When Lan Zhan was drunk, he told me he’d never sneaked a taste of the Emperor’s Smile in his room. So why did he hide all those jugs? He couldn’t have been keeping them for me, right? That’s a little presumptuous of me to assume…*

…Come to think of it, should I apologize to him about the forehead ribbon? his thoughts continued. *I’ve messed with it so many times. But what if he gets all mad and embarrassed and chases me off? Then again, I’ve been messing around in general for so long, and he hasn’t gotten mad yet. His self-restraint has clearly improved. I reckon he won’t get angry even if I keep doing it. No, wait…I shouldn’t ask him. Might as well pretend not to know what the forehead ribbon means. That way, I can keep yanking on it intentionally. If he gets mad, I’ll play all innocent and say I didn’t know. He who is ignorant is innocent…*

Wei Wuxian felt quite pleased with himself.

“What is the matter?” Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian turned his head and answered with a straight face, “Nothing. I’m happy.”

He absentmindedly opened one of the small jugs and tossed one back before promptly sputtering the contents back out.

Lan Wangji put down his book at once. “What is the matter now?”

Wei Wuxian waved his hands. “Nothing! Nothing, nothing!”

As he dismissed his distress with those nothings, he put the jug back and selected another with a morose look on his face. When he'd last sneaked a drink, he'd replaced the contents of the jugs with plain water with the intent of giving Lan Wangji a shock when the man drank it himself. Who could have foreseen his luck would be this poor? Of the two jugs Lan Wangji had brought, one just so happened to be one of those jugs of plain water. And what was more, Wei Wuxian was the one who drank it.

Ever since his return, Wei Wuxian had been shooting himself in the foot every time he wanted to prank Lan Wangji. How very, *very* frustrating!

At some point, Wei Wuxian fell into a groggy sleep until daybreak, when he suddenly jolted awake. He shuddered and crawled up to see Lan Wangji still dressed, with his guqin and sword on his back. Lan Wangji withdrew the hand he had set on Wei Wuxian's shoulder and concentrated his gaze on an object in his palm.

"We have an uninvited guest."

Wei Wuxian squinted. The thing in Lan Wangji's palm was the Lan Clan of Gusu's jade travel token. He knew that Lan Wangji's token had high-level authority: if an outsider was to breach the Cloud Recesses' barrier, he would be immediately alerted.

But no one had dared intrude so boldly into the Cloud Recesses for over ten years. Wei Wuxian hopped off the bed and realized that his outer robe had been removed at some point.

As he dressed, he asked, "Who?"

Lan Wangji shook his head and motioned for Wei Wuxian to follow him. The two proceeded stealthily to a residence standing amidst a thick forest of bamboo. Light seeped through the paper windows. Wei Wuxian glanced at the wooden plaque displayed before the courtyard.

"The Wintry Room?"

Sure enough, Lan Xichen sat with poise inside the room. He was not at all surprised to see the two of them enter but exchanged a glance with Lan Wangji, in which both seemed to come to a tacit understanding. Lan Wangji then led Wei Wuxian to sit behind a screen.

After a while, the bamboo blinds of the Wintry Room lifted. Light footsteps padded into the room. Then the guest seemed to have sat down opposite Lan Xichen.

A moment passed before they heard the sound of jade and stone knocking against each other. It seemed someone had set something on the table and pushed it over.

Lan Xichen was the first one to speak. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m returning it to er-ge,” the guest answered.

It was Jin Guangyao.

“This was a gift from me to you,” Lan Xichen said.

“This travel token has never failed me, all these years,” Jin Guangyao said. “But now that it is no longer effective, it’s time for me to return it to its rightful owner.”

Wei Wuxian understood now. Zewu-jun and Lianfang-zun had a close personal friendship, and so Lan Xichen had given Jin Guangyao a travel token for unimpeded access in and out of the Cloud Recesses. But in all likelihood, he had either modified the barrier’s rules or revoked the access privileges of Jin Guangyao’s jade token at some point over the past few days. When Jin Guangyao came to visit and saw that he was refused entry, he had taken the initiative to return the jade token.

Like Lan Wangji, Lan Xichen did not know how to feign civility. While Jin Guangyao made a concession, Lan Xichen maintained his silence. After a moment, he asked, “What is the nature of this visit?”

“There’s still no news regarding Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch,” Jin Guangyao said. “Many clans have their misgivings and are voicing dissent at my refusal to let others investigate the Cloud Recesses. Er-ge, when it’s convenient for you, it would be best if you open the gates for a couple of hours. I’ll bring some men over to help you deal with it.”

Wei Wuxian had thought he was here to request a search. He’d hardly expected Jin Guangyao to say such things—as if he wasn’t at all interested in the whereabouts of the Yiling Patriarch—and couldn’t help but feel somewhat astonished.

Beyond the screen, Jin Guangyao spoke up again, “Er-ge, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Lan Xichen replied.

“If you’re worried about Wangji, you don’t have to be,” Jin Guangyao assured. “Hanguang-jun is of an upright and righteous character. This much has been made apparent to every clan over all these years. He must have been deceived into doing this. Besides, he has not done anything irredeemable yet. Just explain things clearly when the time comes. I won’t give others the opportunity to gossip.”

“When the time comes?” Lan Xichen echoed. “When is that?”

“After the Burial Mounds have been cleaned out,” Jin Guangyao explained.

Wei Wuxian was taken aback.

Lan Xichen repeated, “The Burial Mounds?”

Jin Guangyao began to explain further. “Since the fight at Golden Carp Tower, anomalies have been sighted in Moling, Lanling, Yunmeng, and more. Graveyards have been destroyed, corpses have vanished without a trace. There are signs that a large number of corpses are moving in the direction of Yiling. They are probably heading for the Burial Mounds.”

“For what purpose?” Lan Xichen wondered.

“I don’t know,” Jin Guangyao said. “People have speculated that Wei Wuxian has initiated some kind of evil array or used the Yin Tiger Tally.”

“He was stabbed by Jin Ling at Golden Carp Tower. Is he in any state to initiate such things?” Lan Xichen pointed out.

“Er-ge, consider the extent of Wei Wuxian’s injuries during the battle with Sect Leader Jiang, when he betrayed the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng,” Jin Guangyao said. “Didn’t he still return to summon and command corpses? Is there anything in the world that could prove difficult for the Yiling Patriarch?”

Wei Wuxian stroked his chin. *You think too highly of me…*

“So, I suspect there will be a Second Siege of the Burial Mounds soon,” Jin Guangyao continued. “I’ve already asked a few other clans to attend Golden Carp Tower to discuss this matter. Er-ge, are you coming?”

Lan Xichen answered after a while, “Yes. Go and wait for me in the Elegance Room. I will leave with you shortly.”

After Jin Guangyao left, Lan Xichen stepped behind the screen and exchanged a look with Lan Wangji. “I am going to Golden Carp Tower. Both of you go to the Burial Mounds. We will split up.”

Lan Wangji slowly nodded. “Very good.”

“If he is truly false, I will not tolerate it,” Lan Xichen said.

“I know,” Lan Wangji said.

— Part 2 —

THE TWO DESCENDED the Cloud Recesses along a paved trail. On the way, a thick patch of grass beside the white stone path suddenly rustled and parted. A small, snowball-like furry head and a pair of long ears popped out.

The rabbit's pink nose twitched. When it saw Lan Wangji, its drooping ears suddenly perked up and it sprang toward him with a kick of its legs.

They had come upon a grassy area. Little Apple was settled next to a tree, surrounded by dozens of rotund white rabbits. Most of them had their eyes closed, sound asleep. Only a few were stirring.

Wei Wuxian walked over to the tree and scratched Little Apple's head. The donkey startled awake, snorting ragged puffs of air through its nostrils. At the sight of Wei Wuxian, it was about to bray loudly when the sleeping bunch of rabbits were all startled awake as well. They shook their long ears and hopped towards Lan Wangji, binking as they did. Fluffball after fluffball swarmed his snow-white boots and circled around him, worked up in a flurry of excitement for reasons unknown.

Wei Wuxian tugged at Little Apple's reins as he attempted to threaten the donkey into moving. The rabbits stood on their hind legs, clinging to Lan Wangji's legs and trying to climb him. Lan Wangji stood his ground. As the two of them started walking again, the white rabbits stumbled over themselves to follow after the white boots. No matter how Wei Wuxian tried to shoo them away, they refused to leave.

Lan Wangji bent down to lift one rabbit in his arms. His expression was still one of indifference, but his touch was gentle. His long, slender fingers scratched the rabbit's chin. The rabbit flicked its long, long ears and tilted its head, its ruby-red eyes narrowing into a contented line from the scratching.

Wei Wuxian tried to give it a scratch too, but it turned its head away from his dastardly hands. "Alas, but it disdains me so! It only loves you. Such devotion."

Lan Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian and handed over the rabbit. Wei Wuxian grinned merrily as he took it in his arms. That rabbit twisted and struggled with all its might, and Wei Wuxian tugged its ears.

“Don’t like me? Hate me? Try escaping then, go on. Try as you might, you won’t be able to escape me. So behave yourself and start being friendly.”

Wei Wuxian pinched and teased the rabbit for a while. It was only when they had almost reached the Cloud Recesses’ main gates that he released it, white fur tousled into a mess. Unable to follow any further, the rabbits drooped their ears sadly and sat where they were as they watched their master leave.

Wei Wuxian glanced back. “They can’t bear to part from you. Gosh, Hanguang-jun, I didn’t expect those little things to like you so much. You must have been very gentle and attentive while you were raising them. I couldn’t do that.”

“No?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Nope!” Wei Wuxian smugly confirmed. “All that flies in the sky, walks on the land, and swims in the water turns and flees at the sight of me.”

Lan Wangji shook his head. His opinion was all too clear: it must have been Wei Wuxian who terrorized them first, and that was why they didn’t like him.

After descending the mountain and taking a hidden path as a shortcut, they left the Cloud Recesses. They kept going until they had completely left the area where Lan sect disciples were active.

“Oww, my stomach hurts,” Wei Wuxian suddenly said.

Lan Wangji immediately stopped in his tracks. “Rest and change your dressings.”

“Nah,” Wei Wuxian said. “I can just ride the donkey.”

“Ride, then,” Lan Wangji agreed.

Wei Wuxian pulled a long, wry face. “But getting on the donkey is too big a movement, I’m scared I’ll pull the wound.”

His wounds had long since healed; this was clearly just him being shameless. Lan Wangji stopped and turned around. He cast him a glance, then all of a sudden, reached out to wrap his arm around Wei Wuxian’s waist, avoiding the injured area. He gently lifted him onto Little Apple’s back.

One rode the donkey while the other walked alongside. Wei Wuxian sat on Little Apple’s back, smiling so widely his eyes curved into crescents.

“What?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian answered.

He was a bit smug, like he had done something naughty.

Although he did not remember much from his childhood, there was a scene that had made a vague but indelible imprint in his mind. A path. A small donkey. Three people. A man in black gently lifting a woman in white onto the back of the donkey, then lifting a little child high into the air and onto his shoulders.

Wei Wuxian had been that child. He was so short, he barely reached the thighs of the black-clad man, but sitting on the man’s shoulders, he suddenly became very, very tall and mighty. One moment he was grabbing the man’s hair, the next moment rubbing his cheeks, his legs flailing around, his mouth babbling. The woman in white sat on the donkey, rocking with its stride as she watched them, seeming to smile. The man remained silent throughout it all—he never talked much, it seemed—and merely held him, supporting him so he could stand even taller and steadier. With his other hand, he picked up the donkey’s reins. The trio moved close together and slowly made their way along the path.

It was one of the few memories he had of his mom and dad.

“Lan Zhan. Hold the reins, will you?”

“Why?” Lan Wangji asked.

Little Apple was very intelligent. It wasn’t like it didn’t know how to follow someone without being guided.

“Humor me, won’t you?” Wei Wuxian pleaded. “C’mon, hold them.”

Although still puzzled as to why Wei Wuxian’s smile was so dazzling, Lan Wangji did as he was asked and picked up Little Apple’s reins.

Wei Wuxian voiced his thoughts aloud. “Mm-hmm. All that’s left now is a little one.”

“What?”

Reveling in his secret delight, Wei Wuxian said, “Nothing. Lan Zhan, you’re such a good person.”

Their future was uncertain on this trip to Yiling, and fraught with grim possibilities. But as he rode the donkey with Lan Wangji leading the way, reins in hand, Wei Wuxian was not nervous at all. He was floating on a cloud, so free of cares he was practically walking on air. Even if a whole bunch of sects came barreling out from the trees along the roadside, he wouldn’t be bothered at all—well, other than being bothered by them being eyesores and killjoys.

He was even in the mood to appreciate the moonlit wild paddy fields that rolled around them. Pulling the bamboo flute from his waist, he began to play a melody, as naturally as ever.

The sound of the flute was clear and melodious. Lan Wangji’s footsteps faltered for a fleeting moment. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, suddenly had a flash of realization.

“Hey, Lan Zhan! I’ve got a question. What was the name of the song you sang to me back then, at the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave in Mount Muxi?”

Lan Wangji regarded him. “What made you think to ask that so suddenly?”

“Just tell me! What’s it called? I think I might’ve guessed how you recognized me!”

By some curious coincidence, the song that he’d played that night at Mount Dafan happened to be the same one Lan Wangji had softly hummed to him when he was delirious with fever in the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave on Mount Muxi!

Lan Wangji kept his mouth shut, refusing to say a word.

“Tell me, what’s the song?” Wei Wuxian pressed. “Who composed it?”

“I did,” Lan Wangji replied.

“You?!”

“Mn.”

Wei Wuxian had thought it was a secret song of the Lan Clan of Gusu, one not meant to be taught to outsiders. He had never expected this to be the case instead! He was both surprised and delighted. There was no need to explain what he was surprised by—that was obvious enough—but he couldn’t exactly say why he was delighted.

He ventured, “If that was how you recognized me, does that mean you’ve never let anyone else hear it?”

“Never.”

Wei Wuxian was so happy, he accidentally kicked Little Apple. Little Apple brayed furiously, as if thinking of kicking its own hind legs to buck him off. Sharp-eyed Lan Wangji deftly tugged the reins tight, and Wei Wuxian wrapped his arms around Little Apple’s neck.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. That’s just its temper, it’ll only fuss a little. Let’s keep talking. So, what exactly did you name it?”

“What do you think?”

“What do you mean, what do I think? Does it have a name or not?” Wei Wuxian grumbled inwardly, *Lan Zhan’s taste in names couldn’t be the same as Jiang Cheng’s, could it? No way!* Aloud, he said, “Are you asking my opinion? If you ask me, why not call it…”

After Lan Zhan rejected over eighty carefully chosen names, Wei Wuxian’s interest finally waned.

To avoid running into cultivators searching along the main roads, they chose remote countryside paths. After walking for a day, Wei Wuxian was tired and thirsty. Coincidentally, it was right around then that they spied a farmhouse by the roadside, so Lan Wangji tugged at Little Apple’s reins to stop it in its tracks.

No one answered when they knocked. Unexpectedly, the door opened by itself when they pushed it. A handmade wooden table stood in the middle of the courtyard, with a tray of partially peeled beans on it. Straw was piled high by the earthen wall, and a rake was stuck into the pile. Chicks ran all over the ground, chirping as they pecked away at rice.

Wei Wuxian saw a few melons piled at the corner of the courtyard and went over to pick one up. “The owner isn’t here. Hanguang-jun, let’s just help ourselves to these,” he said in all seriousness.

Lan Wangji was about to take out some money to put on the table when the sound of footsteps echoed from beyond the wall. Two sets, one in front and one behind—presumably the owners returning home. The moment Wei Wuxian heard the footsteps, he immediately pounced on Lan Wangji and pushed him into the pile of straw for some reason.

Fortunately, Lan Wangji had always been calm and composed, so he did not make a sound at Wei Wuxian’s sudden lunge. However, it was obvious he didn’t understand why they had to hide.

Wei Wuxian was also laboring under a similar confusion.

Yeah, why do *we have to hide? It's not like villagers in the countryside are going to recognize us. Can't we just tell them honestly that we're here to buy food? Maybe I've committed too many dastardly deeds and have gotten too used to sneaking around.*

But the pounce meant he had Lan Wangji pinned underneath him in the soft straw. This half-forceful, suggestive pose evoked a strange feeling of excitement in him, and he decided to simply not get up. Feigning seriousness, he raised his index finger to indicate Lan Wangji was not to make a sound. Then, pretending he had no other alternative, he lay on top of him without any qualms. His heart overflowed with a secret and indescribable delight.

From the courtyard came the sound of wooden stools being pushed and shifted. The farmhouse's owners seemed to have sat down at the wooden table.

A woman's voice said, "Er-gege, give him to me; I'll hold him."

Lan Wangji froze slightly at the words "er-gege."

This time, a man's voice answered. "Just peel the beans."

This was followed by the mumbling of a child, clearly fast asleep.

Apparently, they were a young husband and wife. The wife was preparing dinner, and the husband was cradling their sleeping child in his arms.

Wei Wuxian grinned broadly as he winked at Lan Wangji. "What a coincidence," he whispered. "To think one of the farmhouse's owners is also an er-gege."

His words had an upward lilt to them, making his teasing obvious. Lan Wangji swept a profound look at him and then twisted his head away. Wei Wuxian's heart fluttered, and he leaned over to whisper in Lan Wangji's ear.

"Lan-er-gege."

Lan Wangji's breathing appeared to hitch. The gaze he turned on Wei Wuxian carried with it a hint of warning.

In the courtyard, the wife laughed. “You don’t know how to hold him. Won’t I be the one who has to soothe him when you wake him up later by accident?”

“He went wild playing today, and he’s tuckered out,” the husband said. “He won’t wake up for now.”

The wife broke and peeled the beans. “Er-gege, you really have to be a bit stricter with A-Bao. He’s only four years old and already like this. Can you imagine what he’ll be like when he grows up? That other child has been driven to tears a few times already, saying he never wants to play with him again.”

“But he still gives A-Bao attention every time,” the husband pointed out. “He says he doesn’t want to play with him, but deep down, he clearly does.”

Wei Wuxian let loose a snicker. “Lan-er-gege, what do *you* think about that? Do you agree?”

“Stop talking,” Lan Wangji said.

Ordinary folks could not hear their quiet commentary. As the couple chattered about their domestic trivialities, Wei Wuxian relentlessly whispered “Lan-er-gege” in Lan Wangji’s ear seven or eight times. His crooning was light and soft.

As if he could no longer bear the sound of it, Lan Wangji suddenly flipped them over in a quick, steady movement that didn’t even rustle the pile of straw. Wei Wuxian was now pinned beneath him.

“Say it again and you will be silenced,” Lan Wangji stated in a whisper.

Wei Wuxian reached for his face, but Lan Wangji caught his wrist at once.

Wei Wuxian told him, quite solemnly, “Hanguang-jun, there’s straw stuck on your forehead ribbon.”

On hearing this, Lan Wangji slowly released his grip. Wei Wuxian helped him remove the tiny piece of straw. Bringing it before Lan Wangji’s eyes, he smugly said, “See? I didn’t lie to you, did I?”

Before he could be smug for long, he heard the young wife say, “Even so, you can’t just let A-Bao bully others as he pleases.”

Unruffled, her husband commented, “Let him be; he’s a boy. Boys always bully the ones they’re sweet on. They just want their undivided attention.”

Wei Wuxian’s smile froze at those words.

The child seemed to wake at that point. He mumbled something in his little voice, and the husband and wife both hurriedly soothed him, playing with him for a moment until he fell asleep again.

“Er-gege, that isn’t the only reason I told you to discipline A-Bao,” the young woman said. “Things haven’t been safe of late. You have to tell him not to run all over while he’s out playing and to come home earlier.”

“I know,” the husband replied. “Is this about the old graves that got dug up near the village a few days back?”

“I hear it’s not just our village,” the wife said. “Even the ancestral graves of city folk have been disturbed. It’s bizarre. It’s better for A-Bao to play at home and not keep going outside.”

“Yeah. It would be bad if he ran into that Yiling Patriarch or something,” the husband said.

Wei Wuxian was speechless. “…”

“I grew up listening to stories about the Yiling Patriarch,” the young woman said softly. “‘If you’re naughty, I’ll have the Yiling Patriarch come for you and feed you to the ghosts!’ I thought that was just adults having fun scaring children, but who knew? He really existed, and he really came back.”

“Yeah,” the husband chimed in. “The moment I heard about the grave-digging, I thought of him. And I was right. The city is abuzz with rumors now.”

There was nothing Wei Wuxian could do but resign himself to being inextricably linked with grave-digging. He’d done his fair share of it in the past, that much was true. The Sunshot Campaign was by far the most infamous example—he’d dug the hell out of every last Wen ancestral graveyard and conscripted every last one of their clan’s corpses into his army of the dead. And he'd also turned every single Wen cultivator he killed into his puppets, commanding them to slaughter their own kin and companions…

During the Sunshot Campaign, these deeds had been widely considered inspiring and praise-worthy. But as the Sunshot Campaign dipped further into the past, they were treated with far more horror and contempt. Even Wei Wuxian himself shared the current public sentiment—in retrospect, he truly had gone too far. And with the exposing of his identity a few days ago, he couldn't really blame anyone for hearing about this rash of grave-digging incidents and immediately assuming them to be the work of the Yiling Patriarch.

"I just hope he knows every debt has its debtor," the wife said. "If he wants to seek revenge, go take it out on cultivators. Don't harm ordinary folks like us."

"Who can say for sure?" her husband said. "I was still very young when he killed more than three thousand people in one go in Qishan, but I remember it wasn't just cultivators who feared him. Common folks feared him too. He's a maniacal, bloodthirsty demon. One who would even turn his back on his own flesh and blood."

Wei Wuxian's smile gradually grew subdued.

He had been quite interested in listening to this young couple chat about domestic trivialities, but now all of a sudden, his head felt like it weighed a thousand tons. He couldn't raise it and couldn't manage to look at the expression on Lan Wangji's face. The rest of the couple's conversation was completely lost to him.

Just then, a terrifying snarl suddenly echoed from outside the farmhouse. The family of three had been talking and laughing as they ate their meal in the courtyard, but this abrupt and inhuman roar startled them so terribly that one of the bowls fell to the ground and shattered. A-Bao started crying, and the young man grabbed a hoe.

"Don't be scared! Don't be scared!"

They weren't the only ones startled. Even Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian jerked slightly. Lan Wangji moved to get up, but Wei Wuxian, coming to a sudden realization, grabbed at the front of his clothing.

"Don't move," he said.

Lan Wangji's eyes widened slightly. The snarling creature was clearly both savage and evil. If this farmer tried to take it on alone, he would no doubt lose his life.

But Wei Wuxian insisted, "Don't move."

A scream rang out from the courtyard, along with more crazed inhuman roars. The noise was extremely close—the creature had entered the compound. Lan Wangji could not lie still anymore, and Bichen left its sheath at the speed of lightning. They heard the family of three fling the door open and flee, screaming all the way.

The pile of straw had scattered everywhere after being slashed by Bichen. A creature in black stood in the courtyard amidst the rain of dancing straw. Its hair was disheveled, its fangs were bared, and horns sprouted all over its body. It looked at once terrifying and comical.

Lan Wangji, who had never seen such a monster before, was slightly taken aback. Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, had already opened his mouth to give praise.

"Oh, Wen Ning. Your shouts are ever so scary after not using your voice for so many years."

A resigned-sounding human voice came from the black creature's mouth. "Gongzi…I'm a fierce corpse after all. And this is…how all fierce corpses sound."

Wei Wuxian patted him on the shoulder. "You sound mighty and powerful."

Wen Ning glanced at Lan Wangji. Perhaps remembering that the Lan Clan of Gusu loathed those who were sloppily dressed, he smoothed his hair apprehensively.

Wei Wuxian, unable to bear the sight of the tree branches sticking out of his hair, plucked one off. "Why did you suddenly jump out? And looking like this to boot…were you robbed? What's all that stuff smeared on your face?"

"Dirt and mud from the ground…" Wen Ning answered. "I saw that both of you went in and didn't come out after such a long time…"

“You’ve been following us?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Ning nodded, and Wei Wuxian understood. Wen Ning didn’t dare to approach anyone other than him, so he’d secretly tailed them after they departed the Cloud Recesses. When he saw no movement after they entered the farmhouse, he’d gone over to eavesdrop and heard the young couple discussing Wei Wuxian. Feeling awkward just standing there, he’d thought to scare them away so that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji could come out. And he’d probably felt his usual appearance wasn’t sufficiently intimidating, so he’d stuck a whole bunch of random things to himself.

Wei Wuxian almost laughed himself to death at Wen Ning’s antics. Wen Ning looked abashed as he vigorously wiped the mud away, and as he did, Wei Wuxian noticed the blood on his hands.

“What happened?”

“Oh, it’s nothing…” Wen Ning replied.

“The stench of blood,” Lan Wangji said.

It was only then that Wei Wuxian noticed Wei Ning reeked of blood. His heart stopped. Wen Ning hurriedly waved his hands.

“It’s not blood! Or no, I mean yes, it’s blood, but not the blood of living humans.”

“Not *living* humans?” Wei Wuxian questioned him. “Did you fight with something?”

Wen Ning led them to a patch of forest some distance away. There were twenty or thirty fresh graves in the woods, next to a partially dug pit with a pile of corpses beside it—a “pile” rather than a “stack” because the corpses were in pieces.

Wei Wuxian went up to inspect it. Some of the severed arms were still clenching and unclenching their fingers, while some of the heads were still opening and closing their jaws and filling the air with the sound of grinding teeth. They had already turned into animated corpses.

“You tore ’em up pretty good,” Wei Wuxian commented.

“If I didn’t, they would’ve been completely unstoppable and gone on to bite people,” Wen Ning said. “There were fierce corpses like these all along the way…”

"The entire way? Were you hurrying ahead of us to dispose of them?"

Wei Ning nodded hesitantly. His ability to identify his kind was better than that of a living human's, and he could do it over a greater range too. If that was the case, it was little wonder their journey had been so uneventful. Given the news that a horde of fierce corpses was making its way toward Yiling, Wei Wuxian had been wondering why they hadn't encountered a single one. It seemed Wen Ning had beaten them to it and cleared out any such obstacles.

"When did you start following us?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Since Golden Carp Tower," Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian looked at Wen Ning.

"He lent a helping hand during the fight against the various sects," Lan Wangji explained further.

Wei Wuxian sighed. "Didn't I tell you to find a place to hide and not worry about anything?"

Wen Ning gave a wry smile. "But, gongzi…where would I go to hide?"

Once upon a time, he'd had somewhere he could return to, people he could follow. But now, everyone other than Wei Wuxian was incomparably unfamiliar to him.

After a moment of silence, Wei Wuxian stood and patted off the dust on his bottom hems.

"Let's bury them."

Wen Ning nodded hurriedly and continued working away at the partially dug pit.

Lan Wangji drew Bichen. The moment the sword's aura emerged, the ground cracked apart and muddy soil went flying everywhere.

"Hanguang-jun, are you going to help with grave-digging too?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji turned his head, about to speak, when he saw Wen Ning standing right behind him. Wen Ning tried his best to lift the stiffened corners of his lips and squeeze out a smile.

"…Lan-gongzi, do you need any help? I've finished digging my side."

Lan Wangji glanced behind him at the row of pitch-black pits and the mounds of soil piled up neat and high.

Wen Ning maintained his "smile." "I do this sort of thing often. I'm experienced. Fast."

No explanation was needed as to who often made him do that sort of thing.

After a moment of silence, Lan Wangji said, "No need. Go help…"

Trailing off, he realized Wei Wuxian had not moved at all but was squatting over to the side, watching them work. He'd swiped a melon on his way out of the farmhouse, and now seemed to be mulling over how to cut it open. He caught sight of Lan Wangji's judgmental gaze.

"Hanguang-jun, don't look at me like that. I have no tools and my spiritual power is weak, right? Every discipline has its experts—that much is true. When it comes to digging graves, Wen Ning is the fastest. The two of us might as well discuss how to eat this melon. Bichen isn't usable for the time being, since it just dug a grave. Do either of you have spare blades or swords or something?"

Wen Ning shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't bring anything."

"Hanguang-jun, um…" Wei Wuxian said. "Did you bring Suibian with you?"

"…" Lan Wangji gave no comment.

In the end, he still retrieved Suibian from his qiankun sleeve. With the melon in one hand and the sword in the other, Wei Wuxian gave the blade a flashy twirl. *Swoosh, swoosh.* He cut the melon into eight pieces, then crouched back on the ground to eat while he watched the other two diligently dig graves.

Within an incense time, Wen Ning had dug a row of neat, uniform pits. He apologized as he interred the corpses he had previously dismembered.

"I'm really sorry, everyone. I can't tell your corpses apart anymore. Please don't take offense if I bury you in the wrong arrangement…"

After finishing the melon and burying the remaining corpses, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji continued on their journey.

Several days later, they arrived in Yiling.

The Burial Mounds were less than five kilometers ahead of this small town. Although they didn't know exactly what awaited them there, Wei Wuxian had a feeling it wasn't anything good.

But Lan Wangji was right by his side, his gait steady, his gaze cool. Wei Wuxian had never been one with any sense of crisis to begin with, and with the way Lan Wangji looked, he was even less likely to get nervous at all.

Passing through the small town of Yiling, he was awash in the sounds of the local accent. It was invigorating and incomparably endearing. While he wasn't planning on buying anything, he couldn't help but strike up conversations in the local dialect with the street vendors. Only after he'd had his fill of socializing did he get down to business.

"Hanguang-jun, you remember this town, right?"

Lan Wangji gave a slight nod. "Yes."

Wei Wuxian grinned. "I knew you had a better memory than me. We ran into each other once, right here in this town. I happened to bump into you when you came to Yiling for a Night Hunt and said I'd treat you to a meal. Remember that too?"

"Yes."

"It's a shame you still ended up paying the bill, ha ha!" Wei Wuxian laughed. He sat cross-legged on the donkey, swaying back and forth, and asked with seeming nonchalance, "Speaking of which, Hanguang-jun—do you have any plans to retreat in retirement?"

Lan Wangji paused for a moment, seeming to be pondering the question. Wei Wuxian struck while the iron was hot and pushed further.

"Have you even *considered* what you'll do when you retire?"

Lan Wangji regarded him. "Not yet."

Perfect! Then I'll help you think, Wei Wuxian thought.

He would find a sparsely populated spot with picturesque scenery and build a big house for himself there. He could help Lan Wangji build one next door too. There'd be home-cooked meals and soup every day. Of course, it would be best if Lan Wangji did the cooking. Otherwise, they'd be stuck with whatever Wei Wuxian made. It would be best if Lan Wangji handled the household finances as well.

Before his eyes, there materialized an image of Lan Wangji wearing coarse clothing with patches sewn on his chest and knees, sitting expressionlessly at a handmade wooden table as he counted money one coin at a time. Once he finished counting, Lan Wangji would sling a hoe over his shoulder and head off to work for the day. Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian would… He would… What would he do?

Wei Wuxian reflected seriously on what he ought to be doing. People often talked about earning their daily necessities by working the fields or weaving. Well, someone was already tilling the land, so that left him with the job of weaving. The very idea made him wince—he saw himself stuck sitting cross-legged in front of a loom all day, restlessly jiggling his knee. No, *he* should be the one out with the hoe, and Lan Wangji the one weaving. The latter was more suited to it.

They would catch fish and till the fields during the day. At night, they'd head out with swords in hand to Night Hunt and slay evil. If they got bored of living the pastoral life, they could pretend there was no such thing as retirement. They could re-enter society and it would all be the same.

But this life of theirs was still missing a little one…

"A little what?" Lan Wangji suddenly spoke up.

"Huh?"

It was then that Wei Wuxian realized he had said the last sentence out loud. He quickly and sensibly explained, "I said, Little Apple is still missing a little companion…"

Little Apple twisted its head to look at him and spat hard. Wei Wuxian smacked its head and laughed as he pulled its long ears but quickly found he could laugh no more.

His daydreams had reminded him of something.

He’d once had a little one with him. Had the child lived, he would have been in his teens now.

The Burial Mounds were located deep in the Yiling mountain range.

It was said that the Burial Mounds were a mountain of corpses. That one could unearth a corpse by sticking a shovel into any given spot on the ground. This was true. The Burial Mounds were originally an ancient battleground, used in the following years as a dumping ground for unidentified bodies. This resulted in the place being swathed in a persistent, perpetual miasma of resentment and yin energy until it finally became the nightmare of everyone in the Yiling region.

The trees on the hillsides were black as coal, as if they had been contaminated by resentment. A wall more than three meters high had been constructed at the foot of the mountain. Its surface was densely packed with engraved incantations that prohibited humans and non-humans alike from crossing over, whether entering or leaving. This wall of incantations enclosed the entirety of the Burial Mounds and had originally been built by the third family head of the Wen Clan of Qishan. It was impossible to purify the overwhelming force of resentful spirits within, so they’d had to settle for the second best option—imprison and isolate them.

Wei Wuxian had knocked down this wall once. The current one was new, rebuilt and reinforced under the Jin Clan of Lanling’s leadership.

But upon their arrival, they discovered that a long stretch of the wall had been knocked down once again.

Leaving the donkey at the foot of the mountain, Wei Wuxian strode over the ruins of the stone wall to continue his ascent along the path. Not long after he saw a headless stone statue of a beast. The stone beast weighed more than five hundred kilos and had been guarding the mountain path for many years. Vines coiled all over its body, and moss grew in its cracks. The head of the beast had been hacked off with a heavy axe and hurled a short distance away, where it had then been smashed to pieces, perhaps as a demonstration of power.

This had clearly been done recently, since the statue’s fresh, snow-white insides were on display at its beheaded stump. Farther along, they encountered another statue that had also been hacked in half.

Wei Wuxian immediately guessed that these were the mountain-guarding stone beast statues the clans had set up on the feng shui points—or key geomancy points—of the Burial Mounds after his death. Stone statues like these had the ability to suppress nefarious things and exorcise evil. They required expert skill and expensive materials to craft. Unfortunately, it seemed they all had been destroyed. Truly, what a waste.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji walked a few more steps, side by side. With an inadvertent glance back, Wei Wuxian saw that Wen Ning had already appeared.

His head hung low, and he stood unmoving next to a stone beast statue.

“Wen Ning, what are you looking at?”

Wen Ning pointed to the base of the statue.

It had been built atop a thick, round and short stump. Beside the stump were three smaller, shorter stumps that were charred black, as if they had been burned by raging fire.

Wen Ning kneeled and dug his fingers deep into the earth to grab a handful of black soil. Holding it in his palm, he whispered, “… Jiejie.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t know what to say. He walked over and gave him a firm pat on the shoulder.

There had been two extremely arduous periods in Wei Wuxian’s life, both of them spent here. He’d never intended to revisit his old haunts or take a trip down memory lane.

And for Wen Ning, the Burial Mounds were even harder to forget.

A gust of cold wind swept by. The sea of trees rustled, sounding like the whispering of millions of tiny voices. Wei Wuxian listened intently. Bending down on one knee, he gently murmured something to the ground beneath him.

Suddenly, a bulge disrupted the earth.

Like a pale flower blooming from black soil, a skeletal arm slowly emerged. The bony hand reached feebly upward, and Wei Wuxian reached out with his own to hold it. He lowered himself even further, and the motion made his long hair slide over his shoulders to cover half of his face.

He put his lips to the skeletal hand and whispered something, then fell silent as if he was listening. After a moment, he gave a slight nod of his head. The hand furled back into a bud and burrowed back into the ground.

Wei Wuxian stood up and brushed soil off himself. “More than a hundred people have been caught and dragged up the mountain, one after another, in the last few days. They’re all still alive and imprisoned at the peak of the Mounds, but whoever grabbed them has already left the area. There’s no telling what they plan to do, but in any event, be careful.”

The trio walked further up and came across a number of dilapidated huts erected along the mountain path.

Most of these houses were very small, with simple, even rudimentary designs. It was clear at a glance that they had been built in a hurry. Some had been burned down to their frames, while others had collapsed. Even the best-preserved houses were half destroyed. After being subjected to the elements for more than a decade with nobody to look after them, they were on their last legs. They looked like wraiths in tattered rags, silently watching the visitors coming up from the foot of the mountain.

Ever since they had ascended the mountain, Wen Ning’s footsteps had been particularly heavy. Now he stopped in front of one of the houses, unable to move his feet at all.

This was a house he’d built with his own hands. Before he’d left, this house had been perfectly intact. Although it was simple and rudimentary, it had been a perfect shelter from storms and a home to people he knew and cherished.

As the saying went, “things remain, but people change.” While the things remained, there was nothing left here to remind him of the people that were long gone.

“Don’t look,” Wei Wuxian told him.

“…I knew long ago that it would be like this,” Wen Ning said. “I just wanted to see if there was anything left…”

Before he could finish, a human figure rose unsteadily to its feet inside one of the dilapidated houses.

It lumbered outside, exposing its partially decayed face to the faint daylight. Wei Wuxian clapped his hands. The walking corpse remained oblivious and continued to lumber towards them.

Wei Wuxian calmly took two steps back. “It’s being controlled by the Yin Tiger Tally.”

Corpse puppets that had previously submitted to him would not be subject to the control of the Yin Tiger Tally. Similarly, corpse puppets that were currently being manipulated by the Yin Tiger Tally would not heed his command.

The rule was simple and crude: first come, first served.

Wen Ning lunged forward. He ripped the corpse’s head off with a snarl. Immediately afterward, a low noise rumbled all around them. Forty or fifty animated corpses slowly lumbered out of the black forest. Most of these corpses—male and female, young and old—were still fresh and dressed in burial clothes. They were likely the corpses that had recently gone missing from various regions.

Lan Wangji flipped out his guqin and strummed. The sound rippled outward and all around, and the advancing horde of corpses that had surrounded them instantly kneeled. Wen Ning lifted an extraordinarily burly male corpse with both hands and flung it several meters away, impaling it through the chest on a sharp branch. It struggled incessantly, stuck in place.

“Don’t bother with them,” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Head straight up the mountain!”

He had no idea how many walking corpses Jin Guangyao had managed to frenetically summon with the Yin Tiger Tally over the last few days. Wave after wave kept coming, and the trio beat back the hordes as they withdrew up the mountain. The closer they came to the top of the Burial Mounds, the denser the hordes of corpses grew. The music of the guqin reverberated through the sky above the towering black forest, and crows took flight from the trees at the sound.

It was nearly four hours before that they were finally able to rest.

Wei Wuxian sat atop a destroyed stone beast statue and heaved a weary breath. “I used to be the one using that thing against everyone, but now it’s finally someone else’s turn to use it against me,” he mocked himself. “I know now just how abominable the Yin Tiger Tally is. If I’d been on the receiving end back in the day, I’d have wanted to kill whoever made the damn thing too.”

Lan Wangji put away his guqin, then pulled out a longsword from his sleeve and handed it to Wei Wuxian. “For defense.”

It was Suibian. Wei Wuxian had idly tossed the sword aside after using it to cut up the melon earlier, and it seemed Lan Wangji had tucked it away again. Wei Wuxian took it from him now. He unsheathed the sword and gazed at its snow-white blade for a while before decisively pressing it back into its sheath.

With a smile, he said, “Thanks.”

He secured it at his waist, although he had no intention of using it. Seeing Lan Wangji looking expectantly at him, he scratched his head.

“It’s been too many years since I last used that sword. I’m out of practice.” Then he sighed. “All right, the real reason is that my new body’s spiritual power is weak. Even if I’m armed to the teeth with a top-grade spiritual weapon, I won’t be able to use its power to the fullest. So this frail, delicate man must still rely on Hanguang-jun to protect him.”

Lan Wangji had no reply. “…”

The frail, delicate man sat for a while before he finally braced his hands on his knees and pushed himself upright. The trio continued to ascend the mountain for a while longer. At the end of the path, they reached a cave.

The pitch-black mouth of the cave was over sixteen meters tall and wide. Before they even got close, they were assaulted by gust after gust of chilly wind. They could almost hear faint, indiscernible human moans.

This was rumored to be the Yiling Patriarch’s infamous lair, where he’d committed atrocities most unspeakable and slain humans to conscript them into the ranks of his army of the dead. The Demon-Quelling Cave.

The domed ceiling of the Demon-Quelling Cave was high and broad. The three held their breath as they crept into the cave. Not one of them made a single sound, but the human voices coming from deep within the cave only grew louder and noisier.

Wei Wuxian knew this cave's terrain like the back of his hand. He walked at the front, leading them, and when they came to a particular spot, he gestured for the other two to stop.

They were separated from the main area of the cave by a stone wall. Through the holes in the wall, they could see a cavern big enough to accommodate a thousand people. Over a hundred currently sat in the center with their limbs securely bound by Immortal-Binding Ropes. From the looks of it, the captives were all extremely young. Judging by their swords and the colors of their attire, they were either scions or high-ranking sect disciples from various clans.

Wei Wuxian exchanged a look with Lan Wangji. Before they could start quietly discussing their options, one of the youths sitting on the ground suddenly started speaking.

"If you ask me, you shouldn't have stabbed him just once. Why didn't you just decapitate him?"

His voice wasn't terribly loud, but the Demon-Quelling Cave was empty and cavernous; the moment he opened his mouth, the echo resounded everywhere. As such, there was no need to eavesdrop, since they could hear everything quite clearly.

The moment the boy spoke, Wei Wuxian realized he both looked and sounded familiar. It took a while to recall that he was the boy who'd gotten in that tussle with Jin Ling the other day—Jin Chan.

He took another look at the frosty, gloomy-looking youth beside the aforementioned boy. Who else could it be, if not Jin Ling?

Jin Ling didn't even spare a look at Jin Chan, but kept his head down and said nothing. A loud rumble gurgled from the stomach of another boy sitting beside him.

"They've been gone for days," the boy complained. "What do they even want from us?! If they want to kill us, to chop us to bits, they could at least make it quick. I'd rather be gnawed to death by a monster during a Night Hunt than starve to death here!"

The one blabbering on and on was Lan Jingyi.

"What else *could* they want?" Jin Chan shot back. "They must be planning to do the same thing he did to the Wen dogs during the Sunshot Campaign. They'll turn us into his corpse puppets, then…then use us against our families so they can't bring themselves to attack. They want to let their enemies do the work of killing each other off!" Through gritted teeth, he growled, "That despicable, inhuman Wei dog!"

All of a sudden, Jin Ling icily cut him off. "Shut up."

Jin Chan was stunned. "Shut up? What do you mean 'shut up'?"

"What do I mean?" Jin Ling echoed mockingly. "Did you go deaf or stupid, so you can't understand human speech? Shut up means stop making such a racket!"

Having been tied up for a while, Jin Chan was in quite a cantankerous mood. "Who are you to tell me to shut up?!" he raged.

"What's the use of spouting all that crap?" Jin Ling spat back. "Will the ropes break just because you keep going on and on and *on*? It's so annoying to have to listen to you!"

"You!"

"We are trapped here," another young voice interrupted. "There are countless walking corpses outside, and we have no idea if or when they will decide to charge in. Do you really still want to bicker at a time like this?"

The calmest voice of the bunch was, of course, Lan Sizhui.

"He started it!" Jin Chan objected. "What? You can cuss people out but won't let them return the favor?! Heh—Jin Ling, who do you think you are? You think just because Lianfang-zun is the Cultivation Chief now, you will be one day? I *won't* shut up. The way I see it, you…"

A thud echoed through the cave as Jin Ling slammed his head into Jin Chan's. Jin Chan cried out in pain and cursed.

"You want a fight, bring it on! You've pissed me off now, you motherless, ill-bred brat!"

Jin Ling was absolutely livid when he heard this. He couldn't throw punches with his arms bound, so he pummeled Jin Chan with his elbows and knees until the latter was yelping in pain. But Jin Ling was just one person, and Jin Chan always had a posse to back him up. The moment his cronies saw Jin Chan was at a disadvantage, they immediately yelled, “We’ll help!” and came swarming over.

Lan Sizhui, sitting nearby, was helplessly swept up into the melee. With great difficulty, he managed to urge the others to “calm down, all of you, calm down,” at first. But as he continued to get accidentally whacked again and again by flying elbows, his brows furrowed in pain and his face grew increasingly dark. In the end, he too joined the scuffle with a frustrated cry.

The three on the outskirts couldn’t watch any longer. Wei Wuxian took the lead, leaping onto the stone stairs before the Demon-Quelling Cave and hollering at the crowd.

“Hey! Everyone look here!”

His shout reverberated deafeningly through the Demon-Quelling Cave. The tussling youths all looked up. Seeing the familiar figure beside Wei Wuxian, Lan Sizhui loudly cried out in delight.

“Hanguang-jun!”

Lan Jingyi screamed even louder. “Hanguang-juuun*aaaaaaaaah*!”

“What’re you guys so happy about?” Jin Chan was seized with terror. “They’re…they’re accomplices!”

Wei Wuxian strode into the Demon-Quelling Cave. He pulled Suibian out of its sheath and offhandedly chucked it behind him. The sword was caught in freefall by a shadow that darted forward—it was Wen Ning.

The group of juniors screamed and shrieked again. “The G-G-G-G-Ghost General!”

Wen Ning raised Suibian and slashed the sword down toward Jin Ling. Jin Ling gritted his teeth and shut his eyes, but contrary to his expectations, he felt the Immortal-Binding Rope’s hold on him slacken as Suibian severed it. Wen Ning walked around the cave, slicing free all the Immortal-Binding Ropes. The juniors he set free could neither flee nor stay. Inside the cave was the Yiling Patriarch, the Ghost General, and, Hanguang-jun, who’d betrayed the orthodox way. But outside lurked countless walking corpses braying for food.

Caught on the horns of a dilemma, all they could do was shrink back into a corner and stare fixedly at the stoic Wen Ning as he busied himself around the cave.

Lan Sizhui, however, was beaming brightly. “Mo…Wei-qianbei. You’re here to rescue us, right? You weren’t the one who had us captured and brought here, right?”

Although it was a question, his expression spoke of complete trust and delight. Wei Wuxian felt his heart grow warm. He squatted down to ruffle Lan Sizhui’s hair, which had somehow stayed neat over the past few trying days, and mess it all up.

“Me? You know how poor I am. Where would I get the money to hire people?”

Lan Sizhui nodded again and again. “Uh-huh, I knew it! I knew that qianbei is really very poor!”

Wei Wuxian was momentarily struck speechless. “…Good boy,” he finally faintly praised. “How many people do our opponents have? Are there any ambushes set up around here?”

Lan Jingyi shook off the rope on him and barged into the conversation to answer.

“They have lots of people! Their faces were covered with black smoke, so we didn’t get a clear look at what they looked like. They tied us up and threw us in here, then just ignored us, like they wanted to leave us to perish here. Oh, oh, oh, and there are lots of walking corpses outside! They keep on howling!”

Bichen emerged from its sheath with a *sching* to sever the remaining Immortal-Binding Ropes that bound the two of them. Lan Wangji summoned the sword back into its sheath and commended Lan Sizhui.

“Well done.”

What he meant was that Lan Sizhui had done well to keep his composure and maintain his trust in them. Lan Sizhui hurried to his feet and stood tall as he faced Lan Wangji, but before he could manage a smile, Wei Wuxian intervened with a cheeky comment.

“That’s right, well done indeed. Sizhui even knows how to brawl now.”

Lan Sizhui’s face flushed red in an instant. “That…that was…a momentary impulse…”

All of a sudden, Wei Wuxian sensed someone approaching. He looked back, only to see Jin Ling standing stiffly behind them.

Lan Wangji immediately stepped in front of Wei Wuxian to shield him, and Lan Sizhui stepped in front of Lan Wangji.

“Jin-gongzi,” Lan Sizhui cautiously called.

Wei Wuxian strode out from behind them. “What’re the two of you doing? It’s like you’re making a human pyramid.”

Jin Ling’s expression was strange as he relaxed his fists, clenched them, and relaxed them again. He looked like there was something he wanted to say but couldn’t. Instead, he just stared at the spot where he had stabbed Wei Wuxian in the abdomen.

Lan Jingyi’s face drained of color. “You, you, you! You’re not thinking about stabbing him again, are you?!”

Jin Ling’s expression froze.

“Jingyi!” Lan Sizhui admonished hurriedly.

Wei Wuxian wrapped his arms around the kiddos’ necks, with a Jingyi on his left and a Sizhui on his right. “All right, let’s hurry out,” he chided.

“Yes, sir!” Lan Sizhui answered.

The other boys were still huddled together in the corner, not daring to move.

“Uh, let’s go? Or do you want to stick around here?” Lan Jingyi asked the crowd.

A boy stiffened his neck and said, “There are so many walking corpses out there! You want us to go…to our deaths?!”

“Gongzi, I’ll go out and chase them away,” Wen Ning stated.

Wei Wuxian nodded, and in an instant Wen Ning swept out like a gust of wind.

“The Immortal-Binding Ropes have been cut,” Lan Sizhui said. “If worst comes to worst, we’ll join forces and work as one to fight our way out. What if the corpses swarm in after we depart? Judging by the topography of this cave, won’t you be easy prey if you stay here?”

Having said this, he pulled Lan Jingyi with him. The two of them followed after Wen Ning, and several other Lan juniors followed suit.

The rest of the boys exchanged looks of dismay.

Soon after, someone called out, “Sizhui-xiong, wait for me!” He caught up and left with them. This boy was the “romantic” who had burned paper money and shed tears for A-Qing in Yi City. The others called him Zizhen. He appeared to be the only son of the Ouyang Clan of Baling.

After that, several others followed in succession, all of them familiar faces from Yi City. The remaining boys were hesitant but then saw Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji staring at them. The staring made them nervous, no matter who was doing it, so all they could do was steel themselves and head outside, keeping a wide berth between them as they did.

Surprisingly enough, Jin Ling was the last one out.

Just as the giant group had managed to drag their feet to the cave’s entrance, a figure was suddenly flung inside. The figure smashed into the cave wall, creating a deep, human-shaped crater. Dust and stone rained down noisily.

A few juniors exclaimed in shock, “The Ghost General!”

“Wen Ning?” Wei Wuxian questioned. “What happened?!”

“…Nothing,” Wen Ning answered arduously.

He tumbled from the crater, then stood up to crudely pop his arm back into its socket in silence. Wei Wuxian squinted his eyes to look and saw a man in purple standing at the mouth of the Demon-Quelling Cave with his hands at his sides. Spiritual energy sizzled around Zidian. The whip was what had sent Wen Ning flying into the cave.

Jiang Cheng.

No wonder Wen Ning had shown no intent to counterattack.

“Jiujiu!” Jin Ling called out.

“Jin Ling, come here,” Jiang Cheng ordered coldly.

Cultivators in various clan uniforms slowly walked out of the black forest behind him. More and more gathered until finally, a dense mass of a couple thousand people surrounded the Demon-Quelling Cave. The cultivators and Jiang Cheng himself were soaked in blood, and they looked exhausted. The group of boys dashed out of the Demon-Quelling Cave, crying “Father!”, “Mother!”, and “Gege!” as they swarmed into the crowd.

Jin Ling looked hesitantly to his left, then to his right, like he hadn’t yet made up his mind.

“Jin Ling, what are you dawdling for?” Jiang Cheng snapped. “Get over here right now! Or do you have a death wish?!”

Lan Qiren stood before the crowd, looking considerably more aged. There were even streaks of white in his hair.

“Wangji,” he called.

Lan Wangji greeted him quietly, “Shufu.”

But he still didn’t move to join Lan Qiren’s side.

Lan Qiren understood all too well that this was Lan Wangji’s firm and unshakable answer. With an extremely disappointed expression, he shook his head and did not attempt to admonish him again.

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A female cultivator in flowing white robes stepped forward with tears in her eyes. “Hanguang-jun, what is happening to you? You…you’re no longer yourself. Years ago, you were irreconcilably at odds with him. How did the Yiling Patriarch bewitch you and make you stand against us?”

Lan Wangji ignored her.

As she was denied an answer, the female cultivator could only regretfully lament, “Then you are unworthy of your reputation!”

“Everyone’s come to visit again,” Wei Wuxian commented.

“Of course we had to come,” Jiang Cheng replied icily.

Su She was also among the crowd, his seven-stringed guqin strapped to his back. “Had it not been for the Yiling Patriarch digging up corpses and taking hostages with such fanfare—as if he feared his return would go unnoticed by the world—I imagine we would not have had to come calling at your lair so soon,” he explained leisurely.

Wei Wuxian rebuffed the accusations. “I clearly saved these juniors. Why are you people jumping to accuse me instead of thanking me?”

Many in the crowd scoffed and grumbled, “Now the wolf is crying wolf.” Wei Wuxian knew that arguing with them was futile, but he was in no hurry anyway.

“Come now.” Wei Wuxian flashed a smile. “Your turnout this time is a little shabby. We’re missing two prominent figures, aren’t we? Might I ask why Lianfang-zun and Zewu-jun are not in attendance at this grand occasion?”

Su She sneered. “Hmph. The day before yesterday, an unknown assailant made an assassination attempt on Lianfang-zun at Golden Carp Tower. He’s seriously injured, and Zewu-jun is doing his best to save him. Why ask if you already know?”

Learning that Jin Guangyao was “seriously injured” reminded Wei Wuxian of the heroic suicide feint that had allowed him to carry out a sneak attack on Nie Mingjue. He snorted with laughter, unable to stop himself in time.

Su She frowned. “What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian answered. “Just thinking that Lianfang-zun is pretty prone to getting injured, that’s all.”

A tiny voice suddenly spoke up. “Dad, I think maybe he really isn’t the culprit. He was the one who saved us back at Yi City, and he seems to be here to save us this time too…”

Wei Wuxian looked in the direction of the voice. The one who had spoken was Ouyang Zizhen. However, his father immediately rebuked him.

“Kids should know to keep their mouths shut! Do you understand the situation right now? Do you know who that is?!”

Wei Wuxian withdrew his gaze and commented calmly, “I get it.”

He’d known from the start that no matter what he said, no one would believe him. Whatever he denied could be forced on him, and whatever he admitted could be twisted to fit others’ narratives.

Lan Wangji’s words had originally carried a lot of weight, but he was probably also a target of public criticism after associating with him for this long. Mediation might have been a possibility if Lan Xichen were here to take charge regarding clan matters. But both Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao were absent.

During the first siege of the Burial Mounds, Jin Guangshan had led the Jin Clan of Lanling; Jiang Cheng, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng; Lan Qiren, the Lan Clan of Gusu; and Nie Mingjue, the Nie Clan of Qinghe. The former two were the main forces, and the latter two there purely for backup.

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Now, the head of the Jin Clan of Lanling had yet to arrive, leaving his men under the Lan Clan’s command. The Lan Clan of Gusu was still under Lan Qiren’s command, but Nie Huaisang had taken his elder brother’s place. He shrank into the crowd, still wearing the look that said he didn’t know anything, didn’t want to do anything, and was only there to make up the numbers.

Only Jiang Cheng was still the same as ever. Still the same air of hostility, still the same gloomy expression, still the same intense glare.

But…

Wei Wuxian turned his head slightly and saw Lan Wangji there, standing by his side without a hint of hesitation or any intention of backing down.

But this time, he was no longer alone.

Thousands of cultivators eyed him menacingly, like tigers eyeing prey. A particular middle-aged cultivator, unable to contain himself any longer, leapt forward with a shout.

“Wei Wuxian! Remember me?!”

“No,” Wei Wuxian honestly replied.

The middle-aged cultivator sneered. “You don’t, but this leg of mine does!”

He lifted the hem of his robe to reveal a wooden limb. “You maimed my leg that night in Nightless City. I’m showing you this to let you know that I, Yi Weichun, am part of the crowd surrounding you today. What comes around goes around. You’ll get your just deserts!”

Seemingly inspired by him, another young cultivator stepped forward as well and declared in a loud, clear voice, “Wei Wuxian, I won’t ask if you remember or not. Both my parents died at your hand. You owe so many blood debts, I’m sure you don’t remember them. But I, Fang Mengchen, will never forget! And I will never forgive!”

Immediately after, a third person stepped forward—a tall, thin middle-aged scholar with flashing eyes. He seemed supermundane.

This time, Wei Wuxian beat him to it. “Did I maim you?”

The man shook his head.

Wei Wuxian tried guessing again. “Did I kill your parents? Massacre your whole family?”

The man shook his head again.

Wei Wuxian was amazed. “Then may I ask why you’re here?”

“I bear no personal grudge against you,” the man said. “I came here to join the fight in order for you to understand that he who goes against the world deserves to be condemned by all. No matter what despicable methods you use, or how many times you crawl out of your tomb, we will send you back for no reason other than the pursuit of righteous justice!”

The crowd broke into deafening cheers at his declaration.

“Well said, Sect Leader Yao!”

Sect Leader Yao stepped down with a smile. Encouraged, the others stood up one at a time to declare war upon Wei Wuxian.

"Your underling Wen Ning snapped my son's neck during the Qiongqi Path Ambush!"

"My shixiong died because of your vicious curse, his whole body covered in festering sores from wicked gu venom!"

"I am here for no other reason than to prove that there is still justice in the world. Evil will not be tolerated!"

"There is still justice in the world. Evil will not be tolerated!"

Every single face was alight with righteous ardor. Every single word said was spoken in the name of justice. Every single person was awe-inspiringly upright, impassioned, and brimming with righteous indignation and lofty sentiments.

Everyone had no doubt that what they were doing was a glorious feat, a heroic act of righteousness.

A crusade of "good" versus "evil" that would go down in history, exalted by all!

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Chapter 15:
Peony for the Soon Departed

IT WAS AUTUMN, and the place was Mount Baifeng Hunting Grounds.

Hundreds upon thousands of cultivators would select a location where nefarious creatures dwelled and compete to catch the most prey within an allotted time to showcase their prowess. This sort of event was known as a Siege Hunt.

Mount Baifeng was a large range that stretched for many kilometers. Its abundance of prey made it one of the three most famous hunting grounds and host to a number of large-scale Siege Hunts. A grand event such as this was an opportunity for cultivation clans big and small to demonstrate their strength, for clans to recruit new talent, and for wandering cultivators and trainees to make a name for themselves.

In front of Mount Baifeng was a large, spacious square with dozens of tall observation decks erected around it. The crowds milling on these decks were restless with excitement, and the air was abuzz with their whispers. The quietest observation deck was the tallest and most resplendent one, and the spectators seated there were mostly renowned older cultivators or family heads with their female family members. Behind them stood handmaids holding grand canopies or large fans. The ladies seated at the front modestly covered their faces with their smaller fans as they observed the hunting grounds below.

When the Lan Clan of Gusu’s riding party appeared, all that modesty went out the window.

Horses weren’t usually necessary once the chase really kicked off during a Night Hunt. However, riding was one of the skills the juniors of prominent clans were expected to learn. On such a grand occasion, riding into the field wasn’t just part of the ceremony—the riders stirred magnificent fanfare and painted a splendid sight.

To put it bluntly, they rode horses because the rules said so and it looked good.

Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji sat with poise on their snow-white steeds, slowly leading the Lan Clan of Gusu's procession. Both wore their swords on their waists and carried a bow and quiver on their backs, their white robes and forehead ribbons fluttering in the wind. They looked as lofty as any immortal. Their snow-white boots were immaculately clean, without a single speck of dust upon them—in fact, they were probably cleaner than most people's clothes. The Twin Jades of Lan truly were a pair of flawless precious stones, carved by ice and sculpted by snow. The moment they entered the field, it seemed the air itself grew fresher.

Throngs of female cultivators had fallen for them. Women who were more reserved in temperament merely set down their fans, their longing gazes betraying their eagerness. Women of a more audacious temperament, on the other hand, had already rushed to the edges of the observation decks to throw flowers they had prepared for the occasion. A shower of blooms rained from the sky.

It was customary to toss flowers as a show of admiration when encountering handsome men and women. Thanks to their clan's prestige, exceptional talent, and extraordinary good looks, the juniors of the Lan Clan of Gusu were no strangers to these sudden floral storms. Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji had been accustomed to such things since they were thirteen. They remained perfectly self-possessed, inclining their heads toward the observation decks to politely acknowledge the gesture as they continued forward without stopping.

All of a sudden, Lan Wangji raised his hand and caught a flower that had been thrown at his back.

He turned around and saw the riding party of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, which had yet to depart. They were led by Jiang Cheng, who was irritably smacking his lips. The one next to him rode a silky black steed, resting both elbows on the horse's head and looking off to the side as if nothing had happened. He chatted merrily with two slender female cultivators who were next to him.

Lan Xichen noticed Lan Wangji had pulled his reins to a stop.

"Wangji, what's the matter?"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said.

Only then did Wei Wuxian turn his head, looking surprised. “What? Hanguang-jun, are you calling me? What’s up?”

Lan Wangji raised the flower, his expression as chilly as his voice. “Was it you?”

Wei Wuxian denied it immediately. “Nope, not me.”

The two female cultivators next to him ratted him out with equal immediacy. “Don’t believe him! It was him all right!”

“How can you guys wrong an innocent man like this?” Wei Wuxian despaired. “I’m mad now!”

The two female cultivators giggled and laughed and pulled their reins, trotting back to their own clan’s riding party. Lan Wangji lowered the hand holding the flower and shook his head.

Jiang Cheng spoke up. “Zewu-jun, Hanguang-jun, sorry about that. Don’t mind him.”

Lan Xichen smiled. “It is fine. On Wangji’s behalf, I thank Wei-gongzi for the gift of the flower.”

As they rode off amidst the fragrant air and showering flowers, Jiang Cheng glanced over to the observation decks. A myriad of handkerchiefs waved from the balconies in a sea of colors.

“What are you doing, throwing flowers like the rest of them?”

“Can’t I throw a couple at him ’cause he’s so good-looking?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Cheng snorted. “How old are you? Who do you think you are, playing games like that?”

Wei Wuxian eyed him. “Did you want some too? There’s still plenty on the ground, I’ll pick them for you.”

He pretended to lean down, and Jiang Cheng barked, “Screw off!”

Just then, Jin Guangyao’s voice resounded in the square.

“The riding party of the Nie Clan of Qinghe!”

Nie Mingjue was impressively tall. His presence was already forceful when he stood at full height, and on horseback, his power seemed to dominate the entire field. The clamor on the observation decks quieted significantly.

It was practically unavoidable for men who ranked high on the charts of prominent cultivators to be drowned in flowers when they made an appearance. But Nie Mingjue, ranked seventh, was an exception to this rule. While it could be said that Lan Wangji carried ice within his coldness, a frost colder than snow, Nie Mingjue's coldness carried fire, a rage that might combust into an inferno at any time. He was even less approachable than Lan Wangji. Even if there were girls whose hearts raced at the sight of him, they didn't dare throw the flowers they clutched to their chests with sweaty palms, afraid the shower would anger him into slashing down the entire observation deck with one strike of his saber. But the energy of the male cultivators who worshiped Chifeng-zun more than made up for the deficit of flowers. Today, their cheers were particularly deafening.

Next to Nie Mingjue was Nie Huaisang. In contrast to his older brother, he was smartly dressed as always, stylishly accessorized with his saber and jade pendants. With his paper fan gently fluttering, he was the very image of a fine young master in a turbulent world. Everyone was well aware that his saber would never leave its sheath and that the young master in question planned on spending the day strolling around Mount Baifeng and enjoying the scenery.

Next after the Nie Clan of Qinghe was the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng made their entrance. In an instant, the sky was once again full of flower showers. Jiang Cheng's face grew progressively darker as flowers smacked into him, while Wei Wuxian was enjoying himself thoroughly, quite at ease. He waved at the tallest observation deck.

The best spot on that deck belonged to Madam Jin of the Jin Clan of Lanling. Today, Jiang Yanli sat next to her. Madam Jin was holding her hand, talking to her and gazing at her lovingly. Jiang Yanli was always described as unassuming and demure, but when she saw her two little brothers waving to her, her face lit up. She set down her fan and shyly spoke a few words to Madam Jin, then walked to the edge of the deck and tossed two flowers toward them.

She tossed them with all her strength, and for a second, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng worried she was going to fall off the deck. They only relaxed when they saw Jiang Yanli steady herself. The two easily caught the blossoms in hand and pinned the light purple flowers by their hearts with a smile before they continued onward. A good number of girls around Jiang Yanli shot her envious looks as she returned to Madam Jin with her head down.

Just then, a row of cultivators charged out on tall horses. They wore light armor over their white robes, which were embellished with golden embroidery. The one leading the procession was brightly handsome and clad in the same light armor. He was, of course, the family head Jin Guangshan.

Madam Jin patted Jiang Yanli on the shoulder, then rose to her feet and guided her hand in hand to the deck's edge to point out the riding party of the Jin Clan of Lanling.

Amidst the cacophony of neighing and whinnying, a particular rider suddenly broke formation and galloped one round around the square before he reined his steed to a halt. This rider was quite dashing, garbed in robes as white as snow with a dot of cinnabar between his brows to accentuate his captivatingly good looks. His posture when he drew his bow was fierce and valiant, instantly setting off a wave of frenzied fervor on the observation decks. The rider cast a nonchalant glance in that direction. While he was keeping a straight face with an effort, the corners of his eyes betrayed his pride.

Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue and laughed himself silly on his horse. "Really gotta hand it to him. He's like a colorful peacock."

"Restrain yourself," Jiang Cheng warned. "Jiejie is still watching from the deck."

"Relax. As long as he doesn't make shijie cry again, I couldn't care less. You shouldn't have brought her here to begin with."

"The Jin Clan of Lanling's invitation was too insistent, I couldn't say no," Jiang Cheng stated.

"More like Madam Jin's invitation was too enthusiastic, I think," Wei Wuxian commented. "She'll definitely cook up some plan later to shove shijie and that lord princess together."

As they spoke, Jin Zixuan had already ridden to the archery range. The row of targets was a checkpoint—prior to entering the mountain and formally qualifying for admission to the Siege Hunt, all participants were expected to successfully shoot a target from a specified distance. There were seven circles painted on the target, each corresponding to an entry point to the mountain. The closer the arrow hit to the red bullseye, the more advantageous the entry point.

Jin Zixuan didn't slow his riding speed one bit as he retrieved an arrow from his quiver. He pulled his bow and shot—bullseye. Cheers erupted from the crowds on the observation decks.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng certainly didn't twitch one bit at the sight of Jin Zixuan winning such favor and basking in the crowd's adoration. Suddenly, there was a heavy humph from somewhere nearby.

"Anyone here still unwilling to admit defeat? Just try shooting better than Zixuan!" someone hollered.

The person was tall and brightly handsome, with slightly tanned skin and a loud, clear voice. This was Jin Guangshan's nephew and Jin Zixuan's cousin of the same generation, Jin Zixun. Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixuan had gotten into an argument during Golden Carp Tower's flower-viewing banquet. Jin Zixun clearly remembered this and was now purposely provoking him.

Wei Wuxian merely smiled. Jin Zixun looked smug to see him give no other response. When it was the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's turn to go to the archery range, Wei Wuxian turned to the Twin Jades of Lan. They were nocking arrows on their bows to test their tools.

"Lan Zhan, gimme a hand?"

Lan Wangji cast him a look but didn't say a word.

Jiang Cheng answered instead. "What are you doing now?"

"What is it?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Lemme borrow your forehead ribbon?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji immediately turned his eyes away stopped looking at him when he heard this. Lan Xichen, on the other hand, started chuckling.

"Wei-gongzi, you might not know this…"

"No need to explain overmuch, xiongzhang," Lan Wangji interrupted.

"All right," Lan Xichen acquiesced.

Jiang Cheng practically wanted to slap Wei Wuxian off his horse. He obviously knew Lan Wangji wasn't going to lend him his forehead ribbon, but he just had to ask anyway. He was just stirring up trouble for nothing. If they'd been somewhere more appropriate, Jiang Cheng *would* have slapped him.

"What do you need a forehead ribbon for, to hang yourself? I'll lend you my belt; you're welcome in advance."

As he undid the black band of his wrist guard, Wei Wuxian idly replied, "Keep your belt. I don't want that thing, even if I can't have his forehead ribbon."

"You—"

Before Jiang Cheng could finish, Wei Wuxian swiftly fastened the black band around his eyes.

Then he nocked an arrow, pulled his bow, and let go—

Bullseye!

The flurry of action happened in a flash. He moved as smoothly as rolling clouds and flowing currents. The others didn't even have time to register what he was planning, and they didn't even see what he'd done before the red center of the target had already been shot through.

There was a brief silence before cheers crashed over the field like tidal waves. The applause was even more ardent than it had been for Jin Zixuan.

Wei Wuxian smirked and twirled the bow in his hand a few times before tossing it behind him. When Jin Zixun saw he had thoroughly upstaged the Jin Clan of Lanling, he gave a heavy snort. His pride and his feelings had clearly both been wounded.

"It's only the first arrow to open the event," he said. "You're just pulling flashy stunts. If you're so good, why don't you keep that blindfold on for the entire hunt? We'll see what you're really made of on Mount Baifeng —we'll determine the winner then!"

"…Uh, okay?" Wei Wuxian replied.

Jin Zixun waved and ordered, "Depart!"

The cultivators under his command quickly spurred their horses and charged forth, each wanting to be the first to enter, to quickly snatch up all the highest-level prey. Watching his clan's well-trained riding party depart, Jin Guangshan seemed rather pleased. When he noticed Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng still sitting there on their horses, he laughed.

"Sect Leader Jiang, Wei-gongzi, why aren't you going into the mountain? Careful, Zixun might take all the prey."

"There's no rush," Wei Wuxian assured him. "He won't."

The others were all taken aback. Jin Guangshan was still pondering what that meant when he saw Wei Wuxian dismount his horse and turn to Jiang Cheng.

"You go first."

"Take it easy," Jiang Cheng replied. "Don't get too carried away."

Wei Wuxian waved him off, and Jiang Cheng pulled his reins and led the Jiang Clan group into the hunting grounds.

Wei Wuxian, still blindfolded, strolled unhurriedly toward the mountain path with his hands clasped behind his back. It was like he wasn't here to participate in a Siege Hunt but was instead strolling in his own garden back home.

All the other participants were confused. Was he really not going to remove that blindfold for the entire Night Hunt? How could he hunt like that? They all exchanged dismayed looks. But at the end of the day, it didn't concern them, and they were happy to watch the spectacle, so they departed as well.

Wei Wuxian walked by himself for a long while before he finally found a place deep in the forests of Mount Baifeng that was perfect for a break. His stroll had been blocked by an incredibly thick and sturdy branch that sprouted from an even thicker and sturdier tree stump. He slapped the wizened bark a couple times, and in doing so, determined it to be sturdy enough for him to deftly hop on up.

The forest blocked out the clamor from the observation decks. Wei Wuxian reclined against the tree, and his eyes drooped shut beneath the black cloth blindfold. Sunlight seeped through the leaves overhead and spilled over his face.

He raised Chenqing to his lips and breathed into its mouthpiece as his fingers skimmed along the flute's body. The clear and melodious sound soared toward the horizon like a bird in flight, and its echoes resounded through the forest, distant and continuous.

As Wei Wuxian played his flute, he dangled one leg, letting it sway idly beneath him. The tip of his boot brushed the wild grass beneath the tree, and he paid no mind when it became damp with the morning dew that had gathered on the fresh green grass.

Having finished his tune, he settled back on the tree, crossing his arms and shifting into a more comfortable position. His flute was tucked between his arms, and the flower diffused a faint, cool fragrance from where it was still pinned by his heart.

When he was almost at the point of dozing off, he suddenly jolted awake. He didn't know how long he had rested there.

And someone was approaching.

But he sensed no killing intent, so he continued to lounge against the tree, too lazy to get up. He was too lazy to even remove the black blindfold and only tilted his head toward the sound.

He waited a good while, but the other party still did not speak. Wei Wuxian couldn't help but be the first to do so.

"You're here to participate in the Siege Hunt?"

No answer.

"You won't find any prey near me."

There was still no response, but the person walked a few steps closer.

Now that piqued Wei Wuxian's interest. Ordinary cultivators grew wary at the sight of him. They didn't dare approach even when there were other people around, never mind interacting with him alone, up close and personal. If it wasn't for the fact that he sensed no killing intent from the newcomer, Wei Wuxian might've assumed they came bearing ill intentions.

He straightened up slightly and tilted his head in the direction where the person presently stood. The corners of his lips quirked upward in a faint smile.

Just as he was about to say something, he was suddenly shoved hard, slammed back against the tree. He moved to yank off his blindfold, but the attempt was thwarted by his wrist being seized. There was strength in that grip. Wei Wuxian couldn't shake it off.

And still, there was no killing intent.

Wei Wuxian subtly shifted his left sleeve, planning to shake out a talisman. However, the newcomer noticed his intent and seized his other wrist in the same manner, then forcefully pinned both his hands against the tree. Wei Wuxian raised a leg, about to start kicking, when he suddenly felt a touch of warmth on his lips. Stunned, he aborted the movement.

The touch was both strange and peculiar, both wet and warm. Wei Wuxian couldn't wrap his head around what was happening at first. His mind was completely blank. When he finally regained his senses, he was shocked.

His wrists were locked in place, and he had been pinned against a tree. And the person who had done it was kissing him.

He struggled violently for a few moments, wanting to break free and yank off the black blindfold, but surprisingly didn't succeed. Though he had the mind to keep trying, he ultimately forced down the urge.

This was because the one kissing him seemed to be trembling, ever so slightly.

And Wei Wuxian had thus lost the heart to struggle.

Even though this girl's got some strength in those arms of hers, it seems she's the shy and bashful type. She's a nervous wreck.

This had to be the case, or she wouldn't have chosen a time like this to ambush him. She must've had to summon a great deal of courage before she dared try. Besides, it seemed her cultivation was high, which meant she must have pride to match. If he rashly pulled off his blindfold and saw her face, it was sure to embarrass her terribly.

Their lips brushed and pressed together, careful and cautious and loath to part. Wei Wuxian hadn’t yet decided what to do when those other lips suddenly turned fierce. His mouth wasn’t fully closed, so the intruding tongue slipped inside easily. All of a sudden, he was at its mercy.

He could hardly breathe. He wanted to twist his head away, but the other squeezed his face in their grip and forcibly twisted it back. As their tongues tangled and swirled, his mind spun as well, until he was thoroughly dizzy. A pair of teeth bit his bottom lip, shocking him out of such distraction. Those mysterious lips nuzzled against his own for a moment before they very reluctantly retreated. Only then did Wei Wuxian manage to recover his wits.

Left weak by the kiss, he lay sprawled on the tree for a long time before strength finally returned to his arms.

He yanked off the black blindfold and was briefly blinded by the abrupt glare of sunlight. When he finally managed to open his eyes, there was nothing around him. Shrubbery, wizened trees, wild grasses, vines… but no second person.

Wei Wuxian was still feeling a little faint. He sat there on the branch for a while before attempting to hop down. His legs felt weak beneath him, and his head was reeling.

He quickly grabbed hold of the tree trunk to support himself and silently cursed his own uselessness. To think he'd just let himself be pinned and kissed like that—to think his knees would still be this weak from it!

He glanced up and scanned the area. There wasn't a single sign anyone else had come through. It was almost like it had been an absurd and amorous daydream. Wei Wuxian couldn't help but recall all those tales of lustful mountain spirits and lovesick ghosts.

But he was quite certain this hadn't been some mountain spirit or ghost. It had most certainly been a human.

Recalling how that kiss had felt, a nebulous itch crept into his heart. Wei Wuxian pressed his hand to his chest, and in doing so, noticed the flower he had pinned there was gone.

He searched around on the ground, but it was nowhere to be found. It couldn't have vanished into thin air…

Still stunned, Wei Wuxian unconsciously touched his lips. It was some time before he managed to utter a comment on what had transpired.

"Unbelievable… That was my…"

He searched nearby but still found no one. Wei Wuxian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He knew the person was likely hiding from him on purpose and wouldn't show themselves again, so he eventually had to abandon his pursuit.

He started wandering the forest, and after a while, heard the noise of heavy blows from ahead. Looking up, Wei Wuxian saw a tall, white-robed figure ahead. And who could that possibly be, if not Lan Wangji?

But while it was obviously Lan Wangji, he wasn’t acting at all like himself. Wei Wuxian had spotted him just as he slammed a fist into a tree trunk with such force that it snapped in twain.

Wei Wuxian thought the sight to be very strange. “Lan Zhan! What’re you doing?”

The figure whirled around. Sure enough, it was Lan Wangji. His eyes were bloodshot, and his expression was rather frightening.

Wei Wuxian was stunned by the sight. “Whoa, scary.”

“Leave!” Lan Wangji snapped.

“I just got here and you’re telling me to leave,” Wei Wuxian said. “Do you hate me that much?”

“Stay away from me!” Lan Wangji shouted.

This was the first time he’d seen Lan Wangji lose his composure like this, aside from the days they’d spent in the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave. It had been understandable back then, given the extreme circumstances—but everything was perfectly fine today, so why was he being like this?

Wei Wuxian took a step back to “stay away” but continued his questions. “Hey, Lan Zhan, what’s going on with you? Are you okay? If something’s the matter, speak up.”

Lan Wangji wouldn’t meet his eyes. Instead, he drew Bichen. Glimmers of blue light slashed past as the surrounding trees were shredded by the sword qi. Moments later, they all collapsed with a loud rumble.

He stood there in silence, his grip on his sword tightening until his knuckles turned white. It seemed he had calmed down somewhat. The he suddenly looked over again, and his heated stare fell on Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian was entirely puzzled. He had been blindfolded for over two hours, so the sunlight was still too much for his eyes. With the black blindfold removed, they now kept tearing up. His lips were also slightly swollen. Knowing he must look quite unsightly, he couldn’t help touch his fingers to his chin as Lan Wangji continued to stare.

“…Lan Zhan?”

“…It is nothing,” Lan Wangji stated.

He sheathed his sword with a *schwing*, then turned and left. Wei Wuxian still felt something was off about him, so after some thought, he hurried after him just in case. He attempted to lunge for Lan Wangji’s wrist to take his pulse, but the man sidestepped and dodged away, glowering coldly at Wei Wuxian.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Wei Wuxian said. “I just wanna see what’s going on with you. You were acting really strange just now—are you sure you didn’t get poisoned? Or have an accident recently during a Night Hunt or something?”

“No.”

Seeing that his face had returned to normal and he was probably fine now, Wei Wuxian finally relaxed. While he was curious as to what had been the matter, it wasn’t his place to pry, so he settled for some idle chatter. Lan Wangji didn’t respond at first, but as Wei Wuxian went on and on, he began to give a terse word here and there in reply.

The remnant heat and swelling on Wei Wuxian’s lips was a constant reminder that he’d just lost the first kiss he’d been protecting for twenty years. He’d been smooched silly, and he didn’t even know who did it or what they looked like. Absolutely unbelievable.

Wei Wuxian heaved a soft sigh. “Lan Zhan, have you ever kissed anyone?” he asked all of a sudden.

If Jiang Cheng had been here to hear the frivolous question, he would’ve immediately pulverized him.

Lan Wangji abruptly stopped in his tracks. His voice was cold and somewhat stiff. “Why do you ask?”

Wei Wuxian started to laugh, looking like he understood. His smile was so wide that his eyes curved at the corners. “You haven’t, have you? I knew it. I was just asking, no need to be so angry.”

“How would you know?”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious?” Wei Wuxian explained. “You’re always stiff as a board, who’d dare kiss you? And of course, I don’t expect you to ever take the initiative to kiss anyone. I bet you’ll be hanging on to your first kiss for the rest of your life, ha ha ha ha…”

He seemed very pleased with himself. Lan Wangji remained expressionless, but his face seemed to relax a bit.

He spoke only after Wei Wuxian was done laughing. “What about you?”

“Me?” Wei Wuxian arched an eyebrow. “Do you even need to ask? Of course I’m experienced.”

Lan Wangji’s expression, which had only just eased, was now once again covered by a bitter blanket of frost and snow.

Wei Wuxian suddenly fell quiet. *“Shh!”*

He listened for a moment with rapt attention, then dragged Lan Wangji behind some shrubbery.

Lan Wangji, not knowing what this was about, was going to ask when he noticed Wei Wuxian fixedly staring at something. Following his line of sight, he saw two figures: one white and one purple, one in front and one behind. They walked slowly, emerging from beneath the blue skies.

The one in front was tall in build and handsome in appearance, but imperious in bearing. Cinnabar was dotted between his brows. His white robes were lined with flowing golden hems and his fine accessories gleamed bright. What was particularly notable was his stride: he paraded about with his head held high, his expression and demeanor were both steeped in arrogance. It was none other than Jin Zixuan.

The one following behind him, however, was petite. Her steps were small and hurried, and she held her head low in stark contrast to Jin Zixuan’s flouncing. It was Jiang Yanli.

I just knew Madam Jin was gonna get shijie and the golden peacock to take an unaccompanied stroll together, Wei Wuxian thought.

Next to him, Lan Wangji noticed his scornful expression and asked in a whisper, “What quarrel do you have with Jin Zixuan?”

Wei Wuxian humphed.

Why *did* he hate Jin Zixuan so much? This conflict of theirs had a long history.

Ever since they were maidens, Madam Yu and Jin Zixuan's mother, Madam Jin, had been exceedingly close friends. They had sworn an oath to each other long ago: if their future children were both sons, then the boys were to become sworn brothers. If the children were girls, then they should be sworn sisters. And if they were one boy and one girl, then they would be husband and wife.

The two clan mistresses shared an intimate friendship. They knew each other inside and out, and were well matched in social standing. The marriage should have been more than perfect. Everyone called it a match made in heaven. Unfortunately, the pair in question didn't agree.

The world had revolved around Jin Zixuan ever since he was young. He was born fair and tender of skin, and the cinnabar dotted between his brows was like the cherry atop of his prestigious background and his naturally keen intellect. He was loved by practically all who met him, and his pride knew no bounds.

Madam Jin had brought him to visit Lotus Pier a few times. Neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Cheng liked playing with him; but Jiang Yanli was always there, wanting to feed him whatever she'd made that day. However, Jin Zixuan didn't really pay any attention to her, which frequently made Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng squawk in ire.

The months that Wei Wuxian had spent wreaking havoc in the Cloud Recesses made the arranged marriage between the Jin and the Jiang fall through. After he returned to Lotus Pier, he apologized to Jiang Yanli, but she said nothing in response. She only stroked his head. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng both thought the matter ended there and that the dissolution of the arranged marriage satisfied everyone. They only found out some time later that Jiang Yanli must've been quite heartbroken.

In the middle of the Sunshot Campaign, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's forces traveled to the Langye region to provide reinforcements for the Jin Clan of Lanling. Since they were urgently lacking personnel, Jiang Yanli traveled with them to the battlefield.

She was aware her cultivation was weak, so she instead did what she actually excelled at: fixing everyone's meals. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng objected at first, but she'd always been an expert cook and was happy to do it. She got along well with others and didn't overwork herself, not to mention her duties kept her away from danger. Eventually, the two determined it wasn’t a bad plan.

Because conditions in the area were tough, the meals were generally fairly wretched. Jiang Yanli, worried that her picky little brothers wouldn’t eat well, privately made extra soup for Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng every day. Unbeknownst to anyone but Jiang Yanli herself, she would also make a third serving of soup. This serving was given to Jin Zixuan, who was also at Langye at the time.

Jin Zixuan didn’t know about it either. Although he greatly enjoyed the soup and was very thankful to whoever was thoughtful enough to give it to him, Jiang Yanli never left her name behind. Furthermore, no one knew that all of this had been witnessed by a low-ranking female cultivator.

The female cultivator in question was a servant of the Jin Clan of Lanling. Because her cultivation was weak, she had the same duties as Jiang Yanli. She was fairly good-looking and knew an exploitable opportunity when she saw one. After following Jiang Yanli a few times out of curiosity, she quickly guessed what was going on, and, her acting immaculate, seized the chance. After Jiang Yanli delivered the soup, she idled outside Jin Zixuan’s room and purposely allowed him to catch a glimpse of her.

Having finally caught the mysterious chef, Jin Zixuan naturally had the mind to ask questions. The girl very cleverly did not admit to anything but denied it all with vague words and flushed cheeks. Such a performance made it seem like she had indeed been the one leaving the soup but didn’t want Jin Zixuan to know of her painstaking efforts. And so, naturally, Jin Zixuan didn’t force her to admit anything.

However, he began to show that female cultivator favor. He looked after her, even promoting her from servant to guest cultivator. This went on for a long time without Jiang Yanli suspecting anything was amiss…until one day after dropping off the soup, she ran into Jin Zixuan as he returned briefly to his room to retrieve a letter.

Naturally, Jin Zixuan had the mind to ask what Jiang Yanli was doing in his room. She didn’t dare say at first, but Jin Zixuan began to sound increasingly suspicious of her. Naturally, this left her no choice but to tell the truth with great trepidation.

But someone else had already used the same excuse.

So, naturally, it was easy to imagine Jin Zixuan’s reaction.

He “exposed” Jiang Yanli’s “lies” on the spot. Jiang Yanli had never imagined something like this could happen. She had never been the type to flaunt anything about herself; in fact, barely anyone even knew she was the daughter of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. She could provide no strong evidence on such short notice, and the more she tried to defend herself, the more disheartened she became.

In the end, Jin Zixuan stiffly tossed this comment at her: “Don’t think you can steal credit for and trample all over the kindness of others just because you come from a prominent clan. A vulgar birth can sometimes breed a character more noble than any of the prominent clans. Please mind your conduct.”

Jiang Yanli finally understood the implications of Jin Zixuan’s lecture.

He had never believed that someone like her—a daughter of a prominent clan, but one with such weak cultivation—could do anything substantial on the battlefield, or help with anything at all. Bluntly put, he thought she was just trying to find an excuse to get close to him. That she was only there to add to the chaos.

Jin Zixuan had never known her, never even thought to *try* and get to know her. So, naturally, he would never believe her words.

Having been rebuked so harshly by him, Jiang Yanli burst into tears on the spot. This happened to be the part of the scene Wei Wuxian witnessed when he returned.

Although his shijie was good-tempered, other than during their reunion after the destruction of Lotus Pier—during which the three of them huddled together, bawling their eyes out—she rarely shed a single tear in front of anyone, never mind crying so loudly, pitifully, and in front of so many people! Utterly panicked, Wei Wuxian asked her what had happened, but Jiang Yanli was crying too hard to speak coherently.

And then he saw Jin Zixuan standing there on the side, completely stunned. Of course it had to be that damned asshole again! Wei Wuxian flew into a rage, launched a kick at Jin Zixuan, and the two began to tussle.

It was an earth-shaking fight. All the cultivators in the area swarmed out en masse to try and break the two apart. After piecing together what had happened from all the talk swirling around, Wei Wuxian was even more livid. He demanded that someone drag the female cultivator out for questioning, all while swearing to Jin Zixuan that he would one day die by Wei Wuxian's hand.

When the full truth came out, Jin Zixuan was completely frozen. His face was ashen, and he didn't attempt to rebut a single bit of the verbal abuse that Wei Wuxian continued to sling at him. He didn't even defend himself against Wei Wuxian's fists. If Jiang Yanli hadn't gone forward to catch Wei Wuxian's hand, and if Jiang Cheng and Jin Guangshan hadn't also shown up to drag Wei Wuxian away, Jin Zixuan probably wouldn't be participating in today's Mount Baifeng Siege Hunt.

Though Jiang Yanli remained in Langye to help out, she focused on her own duties and never delivered soup for Jin Zixuan again. She no longer even looked him in the eye.

The crisis in Langye was resolved not long after, so Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng took her back home to Yunmeng. Whether it was because he felt guilty, or because he'd been horribly scolded by Madam Jin, Jin Zixuan started asking after Jiang Yanli more and more often after the conclusion of the Sunshot Campaign.

Those who knew about the incident called it a simple misunderstanding. What did it matter, now that things had been cleared up? But Wei Wuxian vehemently refused to accept this. He hated Jin Zixuan—that presumptuous lord princess, that ostentatious peacock, that boggle-eyed blind man who only cared for outside appearances! He didn't believe for a moment that an arrogant prick like Jin Zixuan would recognize his own mistakes and suddenly start caring about Jiang Yanli. The changes in his behavior were almost certainly only due to Madam Jin's intervention. She must have badgered and rebuked him so hard that he'd finally dragged himself to reluctantly and arduously complete his mission.

In this present moment however, whatever his personal feelings might be, Wei Wuxian had to stay hidden if he didn't want to make things difficult for Jiang Yanli. Lan Wangji turned and regarded him with a confused expression. With no time to explain, Wei Wuxian only placed his finger against his lips to gesture for silence before continuing to spy on the other two.

A pair of light eyes briefly stared at those full, wet, warm lips before moving their gaze elsewhere.

On the other side of the clearing, Jin Zixuan pushed apart some tall grasses to reveal the thick, meaty body of a snake monster. He leaned over to examine it for a moment and then announced his findings.

“It’s dead.”

Jiang Yanli nodded.

“It’s a Sizing Snake,” Jin Zixuan explained.

“Pardon?”

“A monster from the barbaric lands in the south,” Jin Zixuan continued on. “When it encounters humans, it’ll push itself upright to compare heights. If it’s taller than you, it’ll swallow you whole. It’s not too tough, though. It only looks scary.”

Jiang Yanli seemed confused as to why he was suddenly giving her such explanations. At times like these, it would have been polite to respond with “Jin-gongzi is very knowledgeable,” “Jin-gongzi is much composed,” or other such polite banalities. But what he had just said was common knowledge, and an extremely shallow observation at that. He seemed to be talking just for the sake of making conversation. Any compliments she paid him would be obviously fake and insincere—Jin Guangyao was probably the only one who could say such things without qualms.

And so, Jiang Yanli could only nod again in response. Wei Wuxian figured she’d been doing that the whole way here.

A suffocating blanket of silence descended on the scene after that. The awkwardness was tangible, oozing through the grass to take hold of the two hiding behind it as well. It was a while before Jin Zixuan finally began to escort Jiang Yanli back the way they came. He was still explaining as he walked.

“The skin of the Sizing Snake is scaled, and its long fangs commonly grow past its chin. That specimen is likely a mutated variety. The average cultivator can’t easily handle them, and common folks can’t even breach the scaled armor.” He paused briefly, then regained his nonchalant tone. “But it’s really no big deal. There’s no prey worthy of note at this year’s Siege Hunt. Well, nothing that can hurt anyone from Lanling.”

That conceited haughtiness surged up again toward the end of his speech. Wei Wuxian was quite irked by the whole thing, but he suddenly noticed that Lan Wangji was staring impassively at Jin Zixuan. He curiously followed his gaze and was instantly struck speechless. *Since when does that guy walk like he’s got two left feet?!*

“It would be best if no one got hurt at all during Siege Hunts,” Jiang Yanli said.

“What’s the value of prey that can’t do harm?” Jin Zixuan replied. “If you come to the Jin Clan of Lanling’s private hunting grounds, you can see a lot of rare monsters.”

Wei Wuxian snorted in silence. *Who wants to go to* your *family’s hunting grounds?!*

It seemed Jin Zixuan had started drafting her itinerary all on his own. “It just so happens that I’m free next month, so I can take you.”

“Many thanks for Jin-gongzi’s invitation, but there is no need to go to the trouble,” Jiang Yanli replied quietly.

Jin Zixuan was taken aback for a moment before blurting out, “Why?”

How did one answer a question like that? Jiang Yanli bowed her head, seeming uneasy.

“You don’t like watching Siege Hunts?” Jin Zixuan guessed.

Jiang Yanli nodded.

Jin Zixuan pressed further. “Then why did you come this time?”

Jiang Yanli certainly *wouldn’t* have come if it hadn’t been for Madam Jin’s enthusiastic invitation. But how could she provide an answer like that?

Seeing her remain silent, Jin Zixuan’s face turned a myriad of colors, from cherry-red to ashen pale. Clearly extremely upset, he tried to hold it in for a moment, then forced out a stiff question.

“Do you not like watching Siege Hunts, or do you not like being with me?”

“It’s not that…” Jiang Yanli said in a small voice.

Wei Wuxian knew what was going on here. She was afraid that Jin Zixuan had been unwilling to invite her and had only done so because Madam Jin demanded it. And so, she didn’t want to trouble him any further. But how could Jin Zixuan know all that? He only knew that he’d never felt so embarrassed in his life. Not only was this the first time he’d ever been rejected by a girl—it was also the first time he’d ever extended a girl an invitation like this. And it had been rejected! A burst of hostility rushed up within him, and after a moment, he sneered.

“Fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Jiang Yanli apologized.

“What’re you sorry for?” Jin Zixuan said coldly. “Think what you will. Either way, it wasn’t me who wanted to invite you. So if you don’t want to come, then forget about it.”

The blood shot straight to Wei Wuxian’s head. At first, he wanted to charge forth and punch Jin Zixuan again, but then he had a thought. *It’ll be good for shijie to see that guy’s true colors and cast him aside forever. Never pay him another thought again.* And so, he suppressed his anger and steeled himself to endure it a bit longer.

Jiang Yanli’s lips quivered, but she said nothing. She bowed to Jin Zixuan. “Please excuse me,” she said quietly.

She silently turned to leave on her own and head back to the observation decks. Jin Zixuan stood there numbly for a moment, his gaze directed away from her. Moments later, he suddenly shouted to her.

“Hold it!”

Jiang Yanli didn’t turn around, however, and Jin Zixuan only became more furious. With three large strides, he caught up to her and moved to catch her hand—but was thwarted by the sudden appearance of a black blur in front of him. Before he could see what it was, he received a blow to his chest. Staggering back, Jin Zixuan swiftly drew his sword. When his eyes focused, he made an angry noise.

“Wei Wuxian, why is it you again?!” he raged.

Wei Wuxian, shielding Jiang Yanli behind him, raged right back. “That’s *my* fucking line—why is it *you* again?!”

“Attacking for no reason—have you lost your mind?!” Jin Zixuan yelled.

Wei Wuxian’s fist flew out again. “Yeah, and what’re you gonna do about it?! What do you mean, ‘no reason’? What were you trying to do, grabbing my shijie just because you’re embarrassed and mad about it?!”

Jin Zixuan dodged and returned his strike with a slash of his sword. “What was I supposed to do, if not grab her? Let her roam the mountain by herself?!”

But Jin Zixuan’s sword glare was knocked askew by another, and the resulting crash sent both veering into the sky. When he saw the wielder, he was dumbstruck.

“Hanguang-jun?”

Lan Wangji sheathed Bichen and stood between the three of them, maintaining his silence. Just as Wei Wuxian was about to move forward, Jiang Yanli grabbed him.

“A-Xian…!”

Just then, they heard the thunderous sound of footsteps. An enormous, noisy party of cultivators and their escorts poured into the patch of woods.

“What’s going on?!” the one leading the horde demanded.

As it turned out, all the cultivators nearby had been alerted by the sight of Lan Wangji’s and Jin Zixuan’s sword glares shooting into the sky. A single glance was enough to tell that a fight had broken out, so they’d all rushed over and arrived just in time to witness the strange four-way confrontation. They said enemies were bound to meet on narrow roads—and sure enough, Jin Zixun was the one leading the horde.

“Zixuan, is that guy causing you trouble again?”

“It’s none of your business, don’t butt in!” Jin Zixuan snapped. Then he saw Wei Wuxian pulling Jiang Yanli to leave, and called out again, “Hold it!”

“You really wanna fight?” Wei Wuxian challenged. “Let’s go, then!”

“Wei Wuxian, what are you trying to do by always targeting Zixuan like this?” Jin Zixun demanded.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him. “Who are you?”

Jin Zixun was taken aback, then immediately flew into a rage. “You don’t know who I am?!”

Wei Wuxian was puzzled. “Why *should* I know who you are?”

When the Sunshot Campaign first erupted, Jin Zixun had been injured, unable to do anything but hang back and defend the rear. Unable to witness Wei Wuxian’s performance on the front lines for himself, he only had secondhand rumors to go on. Assuming those rumors to be hugely exaggerated, he didn’t have much respect for Wei Wuxian.

And earlier today, Wei Wuxian had summoned all the evil lurking on the mountain with a whistle. In doing so, he had called away many of the fierce corpses that Jin Zixun’s group were on the verge of capturing.

With all their efforts reduced to naught, Jin Zixun was already upset. And now Wei Wuxian was asking who he was! An inexplicable indignation rose within him—he recognized Wei Wuxian, but Wei Wuxian dared to not know him. Worse, he dared ask who he was in front of this giant crowd! He felt as though he’d greatly lost face, and the more he thought about it, the more incensed he grew.

But just as he was about to reply, streaks of gold flashed across the sky. A second wave of people had arrived.

This group descended on their swords and landed steadily. The one leading them was an older woman, a classic beauty who carried a sort of indomitability in the contours of her jaw. She rode her sword with gallantry and grace, and her slow steps were poised and stately.

“Bomu!” Jin Zixun greeted.

Jin Zixuan was blank for a moment. “Mother! Why have you come?”

It was then that he realized that both his and Lan Wangji’s sword glares had shot into the sky. Of course Madam Jin would come after witnessing that from the observation deck. He glanced at the many Jin Clan cultivators who'd come with her.

"Why did you bring so many people with you? I don't need you to interfere with the Siege Hunt."

Madam Jin clicked her tongue. "Don't flatter yourself. Who said I'm here for you?!"

She saw Jiang Yanli shrinking behind Wei Wuxian. Her expression immediately softened, and she went over to take her hands and gently comfort her.

"A-Li, what a state you're in."

"I am fine, Madam, thank you," Jiang Yanli replied.

Madam Jin was quick on the uptake. "Did that damned brat bully you again?" she asked.

"Oh, no," Jiang Yanli quickly denied.

Jin Zixuan jerked. He seemed to want to speak but held himself back. As if Madam Jin wasn't aware of what her own son was like! Easily able to guess what had transpired, she immediately flew into a rage and loudly rebuked her son.

"Jin Zixuan! Do you have a death wish?! What was it that you told me before you came out here?!"

"I…!" Jin Zixuan tried, but Wei Wuxian cut in.

"Who cares what your son told you, ma'am? From now on, he and my shijie should go their separate ways!"

In his anger, he wasn't very polite with his words. Thankfully, Madam Jin didn't care, preoccupied by comforting Jiang Yanli. But even though the woman herself wasn't bothered, someone else used this as an opportunity to start trouble.

"Wei Wuxian, my aunt is your senior!" Jin Zixun barked. "Aren't you being impertinent?"

The onlookers found him to be in the right here and voiced their agreement.

“I wasn’t targeting Madam Jin,” Wei Wuxian said. “Time and again, your cousin has addressed my shijie with callous, malicious words. If the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng were to tolerate this, it would bring disgrace on our name! How am I impertinent?”

Jin Zixun sneered. “How are you impertinent? How are you *not* impertinent? During today’s Siege Hunt, on a grand occasion such as this, haven’t you been stealing the stage at every opportunity? I bet you’re terribly pleased with yourself, stealing a third of the prey!”

Lan Wangji cocked his head. “A third of the prey?”

The hundreds of cultivators that had come with Jin Zixun were all heavy with resentment. When they saw Lan Wangji—who was rumored to be on very poor terms with Wei Wuxian—speak inquiringly, someone immediately leapt to respond.

“Hanguang-jun, you’re probably not aware of this, but as we hunted earlier, we made a shocking discovery! There is no longer a single fierce corpse or vengeful spirit to be found anywhere in all of the hunting grounds!”

“We only learned the truth after sending someone to inquire with Lianfang-zun on the observation deck. Not an hour after the hunt began, there was the sound of a flute! And then almost every fierce corpse and vengeful spirit went to the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng’s camp on their own to fling themselves into their traps!”

“Of the three major classes of prey on Mount Baifeng, only yao and monsters remain…”

“As for ghosts, Wei Wuxian summoned them all away…”

“You care for no one but yourself,” Jin Zixun spat. “How is that not impertinent?”

Wei Wuxian finally understood. When it came right down to it, Jin Zixun was only using the incident with Jiang Yanli as an excuse to go off.

“Weren’t you the one that said it?” he laughed sardonically. “That the opening shot didn’t matter, and we’d see what I was really made of in the field?”

Jin Zixun gave a derisive snort of laughter, seeming to find this hilarious. "You're completely dependent on the demonic arts. Tooting your flute a few times can hardly be considered skill. Is *that* what you're made of?"

"I didn't employ any underhanded tricks, so why doesn't it count?" Wei Wuxian asked in wonder. "You can try playing your flute too. See if any fierce corpses will listen to you."

"A complete disregard for the rules is no better than underhanded tricks!"

Lan Wangji wrinkled his brows at this comment. Madam Jin finally seemed to have noticed the ongoing argument and admonished him.

"Zixun, that's enough," she said indifferently.

Wei Wuxian couldn't be bothered to argue with him. He simply smiled. "Fine, then. Since it seems I don't know what real skill is, why don't you whip out your sword and beat me down with it? Let me learn something new."

If he could actually have done that, Jin Zixun wouldn't be this frustrated. He was struck speechless for a moment, and the more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

"Well, it's no wonder you don't think you're in the wrong," he mocked. "It's not the first time Wei-gongzi has disregarded the rules. First the flower-viewing banquet and now the Siege Hunt—you haven't worn your sword at either event. Both were grand occasions, but you don't care for the slightest bit of etiquette. And so how do you regard us, the ones who attend these events with you?"

Wei Wuxian ignored him entirely and instead turned to Lan Wangji. "Lan Zhan, I forgot to tell you—thanks for blocking that strike for me a few minutes ago."

Seeing Wei Wuxian's utter disregard, Jin Zixun clenched his teeth. "This is all the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's upbringing amounts to, huh?!"

Madam Jin's expression hardened. "Zixun!" she rebuked.

When he heard this particular insult, Wei Wuxian's smile suddenly vanished.

"Upbringing?" he echoed. He slowly looked back. "Demonic arts?"

Lan Wangji called to him in a quiet voice. "Wei Ying."

Jin Zixun and company also noticed the unusual atmosphere. They held their breath as they regarded him. Wei Wuxian flashed a smile.

"You want to know why I don't carry my sword with me? Sure, I'll tell you."

He turned around, and spoke each word slowly and clearly. "It's because I want you all to know this: Even without using a sword, even just using the 'demonic ways' you speak of, I'll leave you *all* in the dust. Far, far behind me."

His declaration stunned everyone present.

Very few clan juniors would dare say something so utterly arrogant, and so publicly. It took a moment for Jin Zixun to regain his senses.

"Wei Wuxian!" he shouted. "You're nothing but the son of a servant! You're completely outrageous!"

Hearing this accusation, Lan Wangji's eyes hardened and Wei Wuxian's pupils contracted. His hand reached for Chenqing. The air was crackling with explosive tension, ready to blow at a moment's notice.

But someone suddenly called out, "A-Xian!"

At the sound of that voice, Wei Wuxian's agitation evaporated. He turned his head. "Shijie?"

Jiang Yanli waved, beckoning him. "A-Xian, come here. Come stand behind me."

Wei Wuxian was taken aback. Before he could move, Madam Jin quickly tugged on Jiang Yanli's hand.

"A-Li, don't involve yourself in their business."

However, Jiang Yanli only gave Madam Jin an apologetic smile before she walked over to stand in front of Wei Wuxian. She bowed to Jin Zixun and his company.

Neither Jin Zixun nor his group knew how to respond. There were a scattered few who returned the courtesy, and some who didn't. In a voice both soft and delicate, Jiang Yanli then began to speak.

"Jin-gongzi, your words seem to indicate that you find A-Xian overly impertinent for disregarding the rules and claiming over a third of the prey on Mount Baifeng. I…have never heard of anyone managing to do such a thing, but I'm sure it has caused everyone trouble. I apologize on his behalf."

She then bowed again, true to her word. It seemed to be a grave and solemn apology.

"Shijie!" Wei Wuxian cried.

Jiang Yanli didn't straighten up but just gazed at him and imperceptibly shook her head. Wei Wuxian could only clench his fists tight and not speak another word.

Jin Zixuan watched this from afar with a complicated expression. In contrast, Jin Zixun and the others didn't hide the pleasure on their faces at all. They were elated at this turn of events.

Jin Zixun laughed aloud. "Miss Jiang is truly well mannered and sensible. Your shidi's actions were certainly greatly inappropriate and certainly caused great trouble. But since you're aware of that, for Miss Jiang and Sect Leader Jiang's sakes, we won't require an apology. The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng and the Jin Clan of Lanling have always been like brothers, am I right?"

All the little speech lacked was for him to start cackling at the end. Wei Wuxian's rage was peaking, knuckles cracking from how hard his fists were clenched. Just as he was about to speak, Jiang Yanli straightened from her bow.

"However, even though I've never participated in a Siege Hunt, there is one thing I do know," she said seriously. "Since ancient times, there has never been a rule that forbids a participant from hunting too much."

Those smug smiles froze before they could fade.

"So," Jiang Yanli continued, "you said A-Xian disregarded the rules. Might I ask which rule it was?"

This time, it was Wei Wuxian's turn to laugh out loud.

Jin Zixun's face turned dark, but he did not rebuke her. There were two reasons why: one, he had never seen Jiang Yanli speak out before, so he couldn’t determine how much would be too much. Both Madam Jin and Jiang Cheng regarded Jiang Yanli extremely highly, so he didn’t dare cause offense.

And two, if they really did officially pursue the matter—there really was no such rule!

Just then, someone in the crowd couldn’t hold back any longer. At times like these, Sect Leader Yao was always the first to nitpick.

“Well, actually, Miss Jiang, you’re wrong to say that. Some rules might not be written, but everyone knows and follows them.”

“How much prey is there to begin with on Mount Baifeng?” someone complained. “Around five hundred specimens? And how many Siege Hunt participants? Over five thousand! It’s already a fierce competition, and he’s stolen so much prey with his underhanded methods. Where does that leave the rest of us?”

Wei Wuxian sneered. He was about to speak when Jiang Yanli stopped him.

“Don’t say anything, okay?” she said under her breath.

Another voice of discontent spoke up. “Yeah, otherwise I would’ve actually caught something by now!”

“But…it’s not his fault that others can’t catch anything,” Jiang Yanli noted.

That man was stumped.

“Aren’t Siege Hunts meant to be a test of strength?” Jiang Yanli continued. “Even if there are no more ghosts to be caught, aren’t there still yao and monsters left? Even if he hadn’t claimed a third of the prey—in fact, even if he hadn’t participated in the Siege Hunt at all—those who lack skill at hunting would have still failed. A-Xian used a different method from the rest of you, but it’s still a skill he cultivated on his own. You can’t write it off as ‘demonic’ just because he claimed a third of the prey that others were never going to capture to begin with.”

Those who joined in Jin Zixun’s uproar all looked equally upset, but they were mindful of Jiang Yanli’s status and didn’t dare to rebuke her directly.

“Besides, Siege Hunts are Siege Hunts. Why bring up family upbringing?” Jiang Yanli added. “A-Xian is a disciple of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. He has grown up with my brother and I. We are as close as real siblings. To so bluntly call him the son of a servant—forgive me, but I cannot accept it. So…”

She straightened her frail back and raised her voice. “I hope Jin Zixun-gongzi will apologize to Wei Wuxian of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng!”

If it had been anyone but Jiang Yanli who’d said this, Jin Zixun probably would’ve hit them by now. His face was dark, and he was deeply silent. Jiang Yanli also only stared at him, equally silent. Her gaze did not waver for even a moment.

Madam Jin finally spoke up. “A-Li, what are you being so serious for? It’s just a small matter, don’t be mad now, hmm?”

“Madam, A-Xian is my little brother,” Jiang Yanli said quietly. “When others insult him, it is no small matter to me.”

Madam Jin shot Jin Zixun a look and sneered. “Zixun, you hear that?”

“Bomu!” Jin Zixun protested.

Him, apologize to Wei Wuxian? Absolutely not! But of course, Madam Jin knew his character. The situation was already an unhappy one, and she grew all the more irritated thinking about the fit Jin Zixun would throw once he apologized and returned to Golden Carp Tower. How she wished she could just press him to the ground by his neck and make him apologize to put an end to all this…!

Just then, two more streaks of sword light flew overhead—Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen had arrived.

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji greeted.

Lan Xichen was surprised. “Wangji, why are you here too?”

Jin Guangyao addressed the crowd. “Everyone, what happened here?”

With his arrival, the fury that suffocated Jin Zixun and Madam Jin suddenly found a target to vent at. The moment Jin Guangyao landed, Madam Jin yelled at him.

“What are you smiling for?! Look at this mess! And you’re still smiling! What a Siege Hunt you’ve organized… You trash!”

Jin Guangyao, who always wore that smile, could never have predicted he’d receive such a tongue-lashing the moment he arrived. He quickly tucked away his smile and humbled himself before her, as was proper.

“Mother, what happened?” he asked.

Madam Jin narrowed her eyes. “Can’t you see for yourself? Aren’t you an expert at reading the room?”

Jin Guangyao remained silent, and Jin Zixun continued the torrent of abuse.

“A third of the prey on Mount Baifeng is gone, so what are the five thousand people here gonna hunt?!”

He’d seized this chance to muddle past apologizing to Wei Wuxian, but just as he was going to continue his rant, Lan Xichen intervened.

“Lianfang-zun has already arranged for the enlargement of the hunting grounds. I pray everyone will remain calm.”

Zewu-jun had spoken. Jin Zixun knew saying anything else would be inappropriate; he could vent his anger on Jin Guangyao no further. He hurled his bow and arrow to the ground and sneered.

“This Siege Hunt is a farce! Forget it. It doesn’t matter if I participate. I withdraw!”

Jin Guangyao was taken aback. “Zixun, preparations are almost done. Just wait another hour at most…”

Sect Leader Yao chimed in as well. “Jin-gongzi, there’s no need for this!”

“There’s already no fairness to speak of in this Siege Hunt, so what use is there in waiting?” Jin Zixun said. “Sorry, but I’m not going to keep you all company.”

With that, he moved to mount his sword and leave with the cultivators under his command in tow. Jin Guangyao hurried over to try and persuade him otherwise. Some joined in the uproar, intending to leave with Jin Zixun, while some couldn’t make up their minds, not wanting to give up the hunt just yet. It was chaos.

Jiang Yanli shook her head and turned to Madam Jin. “Sorry for causing you trouble, Madam Jin.”

Madam Jin waved dismissively. “What’re you apologizing to your auntie for? If you want to yell at that silly brat Zixun, yell at him to your heart’s content. I don’t care about him. If yelling won’t appease you, I’ll help you give him a beating.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay…” Jiang Yanli assured. “Then, I’ll be heading back.”

“Back to the observation deck, right?” Madam Jin quickly said, shooting vigorous eye signals at Jin Zixuan as he continued to stand there in the distance. “I’ll tell Zixuan to escort us.”

“There’s no need,” Jiang Yanli said quietly. “I have some things to say to A-Xian, so he can escort me back.”

Madam Jin raised both her eyebrows up high and sized up Wei Wuxian. There was wariness in her expression, and she seemed somewhat displeased. “The two of you are a young man and woman. How is it appropriate for you to be together all the time, without supervision?”

“A-Xian is my little brother,” Jiang Yanli stated.

“Oh, please don’t be angry, A-Li,” Madam Jin pleaded. “Just tell me what stupid thing that foul, stubborn brat of mine has done this time. I’ll make him apologize to you properly.”

Jiang Yanli shook her head. “There really is no need. Madam Jin, don’t force him.”

“How am I forcing him?!” Madam Jin was anxious. “He’s not reluctant at all!”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Please excuse us, Madam Jin.”

He and Jiang Yanli both bowed at the waist and turned to leave, but Madam Jin locked Jiang Yanli’s hand in a death grip, refusing to let her go. As they engaged in this tug of war, Jin Zixuan suddenly dashed over.

“Miss Jiang!”

Pretending not to hear, Wei Wuxian pulled Jiang Yanli away. “Let’s go, shijie, quickly.”

“That’s not it, Miss Jiang!!” Jin Zixuan yelled again.

There was no way they could pretend not to have heard that, so Wei Wuxian had to turn his head, as did Jiang Yanli. Even Jin Zixun’s group had their attention redirected from whatever they had been fussing about. Everyone was curious as to what Jin Zixuan had meant by such an outburst.

Jin Zixuan rushed over, seeming to want to catch up with them, but stopped short. Standing far away, he gasped a couple of times. Veins bulged on his forehead. A few moments later, he suddenly roared aloud.

“That’s not it, Miss Jiang! It wasn’t my mother! It’s not her will! I’m not reluctant, I’m not reluctant at all!” He held himself back for a few seconds, then yelled, “It’s me! It was all me! *I’m the one who wanted you to come!!*”

Jiang Yanli was speechless. “…”

Wei Wuxian was also speechless. “…”

Madam Jin, too, was speechless. “…”

Even Jin Zixun was speechless. “…”

Having made his declaration, Jin Zixuan’s fair face flushed so bright red it seemed ready to pop.

He staggered back a few steps before steadying himself with a nearby tree. He glanced up, then froze—apparently, he’d only just remembered that there were hundreds of people around. Recalling what he’d just said in front of such an audience, he was dumbfounded for a good, long while before he very suddenly snapped back to reality. With a honking shout, he bolted into the woods.

There was silence in the clearing for a long moment before Madam Jin screamed in outrage.

“*You bonehead!* What’re you running away for?!” She tugged at Jiang Yanli. “A-Li, we’ll talk back at the observation deck! I’m gonna go catch him first!”

Then she mounted her sword in a hurry and flew off with a group of cultivators, chasing Jin Zixuan in the direction he had fled and screaming all the while.

Wei Wuxian had never imagined such a development. After witnessing this farce, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"What the hell's wrong with him?! Shijie, let's go."

Jiang Yanli seemed a little dazed and only nodded. Wei Wuxian waved at Lan Wangji.

"I'm off, Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji inclined his head and didn't speak, but only stared at Wei Wuxian's and Jiang Yanli's retreating backs as they gradually disappeared into the woods. On the other side of the clearing, Jin Guangyao was ultimately unable to stop Jin Zixun and his group. Griping and grumbling, the mob left on their swords. A good half of the crowd that had been so densely packed in the clearing suddenly cleared out. With no spectacle to watch, the ones left behind began to slowly scatter too.

Jin Guangyao wiped the sweat from his face and chuckled wryly. "Honestly…"

Lan Xichen patted his shoulder. "Today's incident was no fault of yours."

Jin Guangyao heaved a sigh and pinched between his brows. "I'm afraid two hours won't be enough for the preparations…"

"Why not?" Lan Xichen asked.

"The truth is, not only did Wei-gongzi take a third of the prey, da-ge cleaned out over half of the yao beasts," Jin Guangyao explained.

Lan Xichen laughed at this. "As expected of da-ge."

Lan Wangji, meanwhile, remained pensive.

"The range of the hunting grounds will probably need to be enlarged even more than expected," Jin Guangyao said, sounding troubled.

"Let us go take care of that, then," Lan Xichen said.

Jin Guangyao was apologetic. "Sorry about this, er-ge. You're here to participate in the Siege Hunt, but I still had to trouble you to help me at the last minute.”

Lan Xichen grinned. “It’s fine. Wangji, we will be leaving. Or will you give us a hand as well?”

Lan Wangji silently summoned Bichen. “I will help.”

Once they had left on their swords, only a few remained in the forest, still chitchatting about the recent show. Not long after, someone strode out from amidst the trees and was slightly taken aback at the scene before him.

The newcomer was Jiang Cheng. While on Mount Baifeng, he’d heard people gossiping about seeing Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan’s sword glares, how it seemed the two had gotten into a fight. Worried that Jiang Yanli was with Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng had come to check things out—but he’d botched the timing and everyone was already gone. Of the scattered few people still around, he found a vaguely familiar face in Sect Leader Yao.

“Sect Leader Yao, what happened here?”

Sect Leader Yao gave him a look. “Sect Leader Jiang, your esteemed sect’s Wei Wuxian certainly is a character, eh?” he said in a meaningful tone.

Jiang Cheng furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I dare not say what I mean.” Sect Leader Yao laughed. “There’s no need to take my words to heart, Sect Leader Jiang.”

Jiang Cheng’s face darkened, knowing what *was* being said was nothing good. *I’ll have to find Wei Wuxian and sort it out later*.

He had no intention of continuing to feign civility with someone purposely trying to be mysterious, so he turned and left the woods. As he walked, he faintly heard whispered discussion behind him. Their voices were hushed, as if they were afraid of him overhearing, but his senses were sharp and he caught every word clearly.

One of the family heads said, sounding sour, “Lotus Pier is such a show-stealer this year. Almost every fierce corpse and vengeful spirit was summoned to the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng’s camp. They must’ve gotten a lot of cultivators interested in joining their clan.”

"What can you do? We haven't got any Wei Wuxians in our clan," said Sect Leader Yao.

"Having a Wei Wuxian isn't necessarily a good thing. I certainly wouldn't want someone like that in my house, causing trouble for me every day."

"Wei Wuxian is much too impertinent… Either way, in the future, I'll not attend any Night Hunts he's participating in."

Someone sneered. "Heh. Interested in the Jiang Clan? I don't think so. Let's be blunt—aren't they solely interested in Wei Wuxian? After all, it was only because of Wei Wuxian that the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's fame shot up during the Sunshot Campaign…"

Jiang Cheng became shrouded in gloom.

It was as if something had cast an indelible shadow on his face and heart.

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Immediately following the collapse of the Wen Clan of Qishan, Nightless City also seemed to vanish with the break of dawn. What had once been the most flourishing city of the cultivation world was reduced to ruins. Scores of cultivators sought out new hubs and relocated to new cities. Of these, the four cities that saw the largest influx were Lanling, Yunmeng, Gusu, and Qinghe.

It was now two months later.

In Yunmeng, people hurried along a long, rambling street. The various clans' and sects' up-and-coming disciples strolled around with their swords at their waists, pontificating to each other on the world's current state of affairs. All were in high spirits.

All of a sudden, the people milling about the long street lowered their voices slightly and looked in unison toward the end of the road. A young man in white was slowly walking along. He wore a forehead ribbon and carried a guqin and sword on his back.

This man’s appearance was extremely dashing and refined, yet he seemed to be enveloped in an aura of frost and snow. Before he had even drawn close to the crowds, the cultivators fell silent of their own initiative and met his eyes as a show of respect. Some of the slightly more well-known ones boldly went forward to pay their salutations.

“Hanguang-jun.”

Lan Wangji nodded his head slightly, meticulously returning each greeting. He did not linger, and the other cultivators backed off voluntarily, not daring to bother him.

However, a colorfully dressed young girl approached him with a smile. She brushed past him in a hurry and suddenly threw something to him as she did. Lan Wangji swiftly caught it and lowered his head to inspect it.

It was a flower bud, white as snow, delicate and fresh, with dew still gathered on it. As Lan Wangji stood silent and motionless, another lithe and graceful figure walked over and tossed a small, light blue flower with a wave of her hand. She had meant to aim for his chest, but it missed and hit him on his shoulder instead. Lan Wangji caught it with his fingertips and turned to look at her. That woman giggled and feigned bashfulness, covering her face as she fled.

The third time was a young girl of tender age who wore her hair in double-buns. She skipped toward him, holding a bouquet of flowering branches in her arms. They were sprinkled with red buds. She threw the bouquet at his chest, then turned and ran.

This happened again and again. Lan Wangji was expressionless as he stood there on the street, bearing an armful of flowers and flowering branches in a myriad of colors. The cultivators who recognized Hanguang-jun wanted to laugh but didn’t dare to; they put on solemn looks even as their gazes kept drifting over. On the other hand, the common folk who didn’t recognize him were already starting to point at him. As Lan Wangji pondered this predicament with eyes downcast, he felt something land on his head. He raised his hand. A blooming pink peony had landed right on target, tucking itself into his hair above his ear.

A smiling voice called to him from the top of a tall building nearby. “Lan Zhan—ah, rather, Hanguang-jun. What a coincidence!”

Lan Wangji looked up to see an elaborate building decorated with fluttering gauze curtains. A slender man dressed in black reclined against the red-lacquered balustrade. One of his arms dangled from the railing, holding an exquisite black earthenware wine jug. Half of the wine jug's red tassel was draped over his arm, while the other half drifted leisurely in the breeze.

At the sight of Wei Wuxian, the disciples from the various clans and sects who had initially been watching the show now pulled odd faces. Everyone knew that the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun were not on good terms. They bickered often, even when they fought on the same side during the Sunshot Campaign, and it was anyone's guess what would go down between the two of them this time. Giving up all pretense of politeness, everyone stared at the two men with increasing interest.

Contrary to what they expected, Lan Wangji did not leave with a cold flick of his sleeves. He merely said, "It is you."

"It *is* me!" Wei Wuxian confirmed. "The only one who would do such a frivolous thing is, of course, me. Wherever did you find the time to visit Yunmeng? If you're not in a hurry, why not come on up for a drink?"

A few young girls surrounded Wei Wuxian. They squeezed together at the balustrade and beamed down at Lan Wangji with coaxing smiles.

“That’s right, gongzi. Come on up for a drink!”

Those girls were the ones who had been tossing flowers at Lan Wangji earlier. It wasn’t hard to guess who’d told them to do so.

Lan Wangji lowered his head and turned to leave. Wei Wuxian was not at all surprised to see Lan Wangji’s lack of reaction to his teasing. With a click of his tongue, he rolled off the balustrade seat and tilted his head back to drink a mouthful of liquor from the jug. Unexpectedly, a moment later, moderate and unhurried footsteps echoed from the floor below.

With steady steps, Lan Wangji ascended the stairs and lifted the curtain to enter the room where Wei Wuxian was idling. The strings of the beaded curtain clinked together, the sound clear as a melody.

He set the collection of flowers that he had been pelted with on the small table. “Your flowers.”

Wei Wuxian leaned over to the table. “You’re welcome. They’re your flowers, since I gave them to you.”

“Why?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Why not?” Wei Wuxian answered. “Just wanted to see your reaction to this kind of thing.”

“Frivolous,” Lan Wangji said.

“You bet,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “That’s the only reason why I would’ve dragged you all the way up here… Oh, come on, man. Don’t leave. You’re already here, so why not have a cup or two before you go?”

“Alcohol is prohibited.”

“I *know* booze is prohibited at your place. But this isn’t the Cloud Recesses. It’s fine to have a cup or two.”

Those girls promptly produced a new wine cup. Once they’d filled it to the brim, they pushed it over toward the flowers. Lan Wangji still didn’t look inclined to take a seat, but he didn’t seem inclined to leave either.

“You rarely make trips down to Yunmeng. Are you really not going to sample the fine local liquor?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Well, though the liquor here’s lovely, it still can’t compare to Emperor’s Smile from Gusu. That’s some unparalleled stuff. When I have a chance to visit Gusu again, I’m going to grab eight or ten jugs, stash them away, and guzzle them all in one go. Say, what's the matter with you? There's places all around to sit and you just have to keep standing there. Come on, take a seat."

The girls all urged him on.

"Go on, take a seat!"

"Sit down, won't you?"

Lan Wangji's light eyes frostily examined the charming, beautiful girls before his gaze landed on the shiny black, red-tasseled flute hung on Wei Wuxian's waist. He lowered his head, seeming to be contemplating his choice of wording. Wei Wuxian quirked an eyebrow at the sight of this, as if he'd already figured out what Lan Wangji was about to say.

Sure enough, Lan Wangji slowly said, "You should not while away your time with things nefarious."

The teasing smiles on the faces of the girls around Wei Wuxian instantly vanished.

The gauze curtains fluttered, intermittently blocking out the sunlight. The interior of the room flickered between illumination and darkness. The girls' snow-white faces seemed too pale, as if they were totally devoid of blood. They almost seemed ghostly. Their eyes stared so fixedly at Lan Wangji that it was chilling.

Wei Wuxian lifted a hand to motion for them to stand down and shook his head. "Lan Zhan, the older you get, the less interesting you become. You're so young. It's not like you're seventy or eighty. Why do you keep following your shufu's example, always so methodically concerned with lecturing people?"

Lan Wangji turned and took a step closer to Wei Wuxian. "Wei Ying, it is best if you return to Gusu with me after all."

"…It's been a long time since I heard you say that. The Sunshot Campaign is over; I thought you'd long since given up."

"Did you notice certain signs during the Siege Hunt on Mount Baifeng?" Lan Wangji asked.

"What signs?"

"A loss of control."

"You mean when I almost got into it with Jin Zixuan?" Wei Wuxian scoffed. "I think you've got the wrong idea. I've always had the urge to fight him every time I see him."

"And the things you said afterward," Lan Wangji added.

"What things?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I say so many things every day. I've long since forgotten what I said two months ago."

Lan Wangji regarded him, like he knew the latter wasn't taking his concerns seriously. He drew in a breath.

"Wei Ying," he stubbornly continued. "The demonic path injures the body. And more so, one's nature."

Looking as if he had a headache, Wei Wuxian sighed resignedly. "Lan Zhan, you… I'm done listening to this. Haven't you said enough? You said it's harmful to my body, but I'm totally fine right now. You also said it's harmful to my nature, but I've never been *that* deranged, have I?

"It is still not too late. But if you come to regret it in the future, it will be far…"

Wei Wuxian's expression changed. Without waiting for him to finish, he sprang to his feet.

"Lan Zhan!"

Behind him, the girls' eyes glinted with red light.

"Don't move," Wei Wuxian ordered them curtly.

At his command, they lowered their heads and stepped back, but their steely glaring did not cease.

"How do I say this?" Wei Wuxian mused to Lan Wangji. "Although I don't think I'll ever regret it, I also don't like it when others idly predict what'll happen to me in the future."

After a moment of silence, Lan Wangji replied, "I was out of line."

"It's fine," Wei Wuxian said. "But it seems I really shouldn't have invited you up here. I'm the one who was too presumptuous today."

"You were not."

Wei Wuxian smiled politely. “Really? That’s good, then.” He downed the remaining contents of his cup, then waved his hand dismissively. “But thank you anyway. I’ll take your comments as a sign of your concern and not bother Hanguang-jun any further. We’ll meet again if fate decrees.”

When Wei Wuxian returned to Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng was wiping his sword. He looked up for a moment.

“Back?”

“Yeah.”

“You look gloomy,” Jiang Cheng observed. “Don’t tell me you ran into Jin Zixuan?”

“Worse than encountering Jin Zixuan,” Wei Wuxian said. “Guess who?”

“Give me a hint.”

“He wants to lock me up.”

Jiang Cheng frowned. “Lan Wangji? Why is he here in Yunmeng?”

“No idea,” Wei Wuxian said. “He was hanging out on the street. Probably here looking for someone. He hasn’t gone on about that for a long time, not since the Sunshot Campaign. And now he’s at it again.”

“You’re the one who called out to him first, though,” Jiang Cheng pointed out.

“How do you know?”

“Do you even need to ask?” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “When have you ever *not* been the one calling out to him first? You’re a strange one. You always part on bad terms, so why do you work tirelessly to annoy him?”

Wei Wuxian thought for a moment. “Because I have nothing better to do?”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, clearly thinking, *so you know it too*. He shifted his attention back to his sword.

“How many times a day do you need to wipe that thing down?” Wei Wuxian asked.

"Thrice," Jiang Cheng answered. "Where's your sword? How long has it been since you last polished it?"

Wei Wuxian grabbed a pear and took a bite. "In my room somewhere. Once a month is good enough."

"From now on, don't leave your sword behind during major events like hunts or symposiums," Jiang Cheng instructed. "Carry it with you, or you'll just keep giving people opportunities to ridicule you for your lack of etiquette."

"I hate it when people force me to do things, you know that," Wei Wuxian said. "The more you force me, the more I don't want to do it. I'm *not* taking my sword with me, and what can anyone do about it?"

Jiang Cheng shot him a glare.

"And I have no desire to spar with a bunch of people I don't know," Wei Wuxian continued. "My sword must see blood whenever it leaves its sheath. Unless they plan to give me a few people to kill, they can get off my back. I might as well not take it with me, so I don't have to deal with that. Get me some peace and quiet."

"Didn't you use to love showing off your swordplay in front of people?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"I was a kid," Wei Wuxian said. "Who can stay a kid forever?"

Jiang Cheng snorted a laugh. "If you won't carry a sword, that's fine. It doesn't matter. But stop messing with Jin Zixuan. He's Jin Guangshan's only son, after all, and he'll be the head of the Jin Clan of Lanling in the future. If you pick fights with him, what would you have me do, as the head of the family? Fight him with you? Or punish you?"

"Isn't there another son kicking around the place now? Jin Guangyao is so much easier on the eyes than him," Wei Wuxian commented.

After Jiang Cheng was done polishing his sword, he scrutinized it closely for a moment before finally putting Sandu back into its sheath. "What good is it, being easier on the eyes? No matter how agreeable or quick-witted he is, he'll never be more than a family retainer who welcomes and sees off guests. He'll get no further than that in this lifetime, and he can't compare to Jin Zixuan."

Judging by his tone, he actually seemed to hold Jin Zixuan in high esteem.

“Jiang Cheng, answer me honestly,” Wei Wuxian began. “What are you trying to say? Last time, you made a special point of bringing shijie along. Don’t tell me you really want shijie to—”

“It’s not entirely out of the question.”

“Not entirely out of the question?” Wei Wuxian repeated. “Did you forget what he did back in Langye? And you’re telling me it’s ‘not entirely out of the question’?!”

“He probably regrets it now.”

“Who cares if he regrets it?” Wei Wuxian said. “Must we forgive him just because he realizes the error of his ways? Look at how his dad behaves. Who knows if he’ll turn out just the same in the future—traveling far and wide to hunt for women to screw around with! Shijie and him? Can you stand it?!”

“He wouldn’t dare!” Jiang Cheng stated grimly. After a pause, he glanced at Wei Wuxian. “But it’s not up to you to forgive him or not. Jiejie likes him. What more can we do?”

Wei Wuxian was promptly rendered speechless. After a moment, he squeezed out a reply.

“Of all the people out there to like, why *him*…” He chucked the pear. “Where’s shijie?”

“No idea,” Jiang Cheng answered. “Probably in one of her usual spots. If not the kitchen, then her chambers, or else the Ancestral Hall. Where else can she go?”

Wei Wuxian left the Sword Hall and headed to the kitchen first. Half a pot of steaming soup was simmering on the fire, but she wasn’t there. He went to Jiang Yanli’s chambers next, and she wasn’t there either. Finally, he went to the Ancestral Hall.

And sure enough, there she was.

Jiang Yanli sat on her heels in the Ancestral Hall, whispering as she wiped down her parents’ memorial tablets.

Wei Wuxian poked his head in. “Shijie? Are you chatting with Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu again?”

“Neither of you visit, so I have to,” Jiang Yanli answered softly.

Wei Wuxian entered, sat down beside her, and wiped the tablets together with her.

Jiang Yanli glanced at him. “A-Xian, why are you looking at me like that? Is there something you want to tell me?”

Wei Wuxian only smiled. “Nothing. I’m just here to roll around,” he said, and then really did so.

“Xianxian, how old are you now?” Jiang Yanli teased.

“Three!” Wei Wuxian said as he continued to roll around.

Seeing that he’d managed to make Jiang Yanli laugh, he sat up. He contemplated for a moment, then went ahead with what he’d wanted to talk about.

“Shijie, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why would a person like another person?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I’m talking about *that* kind of like.”

Slightly taken aback, Jiang Yanli wondered, “Why are you asking me this? Have you found someone you like? What kind of girl is she?”

“No, I’m never gonna like anyone. Or at least, I don’t want to like anyone *that* much,” Wei Wuxian replied. “Isn’t that the same as putting reins on my own neck?”

“Three years old is a bit of an overestimation,” Jiang Yanli teased. “One year old is more like it.”

“No, I’m already three!” Wei Wuxian insisted. “And three-year-old Xianxian is hungry! What to do?!”

Jiang Yanli chuckled. “Yes, well, there’s soup in the kitchen. Go have some. But I wonder if Xianxian can reach the stove?”

“If I can’t, then shijie just has to pick me up and I’ll be able to reach it…”

Wei Wuxian was in the midst of spouting nonsense when Jiang Cheng strode into the Ancestral Hall.

On hearing Wei Wuxian, he spat, “Shooting your mouth off again! Your sect leader filled a bowl for you and put it outside. Kneel to me now to say your thanks, then get out there to have your soup!”

Wei Wuxian skipped out for a look, then whirled back inside. “What is the meaning of this, Jiang Cheng?! Where are the pork ribs?!”

“I ate them all,” Jiang Cheng said. “Only lotus roots left. Eat the soup or don’t, as you please.”

Wei Wuxian jabbed his elbow into Jiang Cheng’s stomach. “Spit ’em out!”

“Sure, I’ll spit ’em out! You’d better eat them all when I do!”

Hearing them start again, Jiang Yanli hurriedly intervened. “All right, all right. How old are you *both*, to be fighting over some pork ribs? I’ll just make another pot…”

Wei Wuxian loved Jiang Yanli’s lotus root and pork rib soup more than anything else, not just because it was genuinely delicious, but because he always remembered the first time he’d eaten it.

It had been not long after Jiang Fengmian brought Wei Wuxian back from Yiling. The moment he entered the gates, he saw a haughty little young master running all over the drilling grounds with a few puppies on leashes. Wei Wuxian immediately covered his face with both hands, screamed, and then started bawling his eyes out. He clung to Jiang Fengmian the entire day, refusing to come down from his arms no matter what.

The next day, the puppies that Jiang Cheng had been raising were given away.

This incident infuriated Jiang Cheng, who cried rivers’ worth of tears. Even when Jiang Fengmian coaxed and comforted him with sweet, gentle words, entreating him to “play nice and be friends,” Jiang Cheng refused to speak to Wei Wuxian.

Several days later, seeing that Jiang Cheng’s temper had cooled a bit, Jiang Fengmian decided to strike while the iron was hot. He moved Wei

Wuxian into Jiang Cheng's room, in hopes that sharing a space would improve their relationship.

Though he felt awkward, Jiang Cheng was about to agree to this arrangement. Unfortunately, on hearing Jiang Cheng consent, Jiang Fengmian was so delighted that he picked Wei Wuxian up and let him sit on his arm.

Jiang Cheng, seeing this play out, was completely dumbstruck. Madam Yu simply let out a grim laugh at the sight and left with a fling of her sleeve. Since the couple had their own respective matters to urgently attend to, they left in a hurry and had no time to get into an argument over the matter.

That night, Jiang Cheng locked Wei Wuxian out of the room and refused to let him enter. Wei Wuxian banged on the door.

"Shidi, shidi, lemme in. Please, I wanna sleep."

With his back against the door inside, Jiang Cheng yelled, "Who's your shidi?! Give me back Feifei, Moli, and Xiao-ai!"

Feifei, Moli, and Xiao-ai were the puppies that he'd used to own. Wei Wuxian knew Jiang Fengmian had sent them away because of him. He quietly replied, "I'm sorry, but…but I'm really very scared of them…"

Jiang Cheng could count the number of times Jiang Fengmian had ever picked him up on the fingers of one hand. Each time he did, it was enough to make Jiang Cheng happy for months on end. The anger and resentment simmered within him, with no outlet for release. The only thought in his mind was *why, why, why*?

And then, in the room that used to be his and his alone, he found a set of bedding that did not belong to him. His indignation and resentment got the better of him, and he stormed over to pick up Wei Wuxian's mat and blanket in his arms.

Wei Wuxian had been helplessly waiting by the door for a long time when it suddenly was flung open. Before he could express his delight, he was almost knocked over by the pile of bedding that was flung outside.

The wooden door slammed shut once again. "Go sleep somewhere else! This is my room! Are you going to steal my room too?!"

Wei Wuxian didn't understand what Jiang Cheng was angry about. Stupefied, he said, "I'm not. It was Jiang-shushu who told me to stay with you."

Jiang Cheng's eyes reddened as soon as he heard Wei Wuxian mention his father. It felt like he was flaunting it on purpose. "Go away! Show your face again and I'll get a pack of dogs to bite you!"

Wei Wuxian stood there at the door and felt a rush of fear when he heard that Jiang Cheng was going to set dogs on him. Wringing his hands, he hurriedly said, "I'll go, I'll go. Don't call the dogs!"

Dragging his mat and blanket, which had been thrown outside, he dashed down the long veranda. He didn't dare horse around so soon after arriving at Lotus Pier and would obediently stay put wherever Jiang Fengmian decided to settle him every day. He didn't know his way around any of the rooms and was afraid to knock on any doors for fear of interrupting someone's dreams.

After thinking for a moment, he walked over to a sheltered corner of the wooden veranda and spread out his mat to lie down. But the longer he lay there, the louder Jiang Cheng's *"I'll get a pack of dogs to bite you!"* echoed in his mind. Wei Wuxian grew increasingly frightened the more he thought about it, tossing and turning under the blanket. Even the slightest rustle of leaves made him panic, certain that there was a pack of dogs silently surrounding him.

After struggling for a while, he couldn't stay there any longer. He leapt to his feet, rolled up his mat and folded his blanket, and fled from Lotus Pier.

He ran with the night wind for quite a while, gasping and panting. He saw a tree and climbed it without hesitation, clinging to the trunk with both arms and legs. Only when he felt he was sufficiently high up did he manage to calm down a little.

He didn't know how long he clung to that tree. Eventually, Wei Wuxian heard someone softly calling his name from afar. The voice got closer and closer. Not long later, a young girl in white with a lantern in hand appeared beneath the tree.

Wei Wuxian recognized her as Jiang Cheng’s elder sister. He kept silent, hoping he wouldn’t be discovered, but Jiang Yanli still called out to him.

“Is that A-Ying? What are you doing all the way up there?”

Wei Wuxian stayed silent. Jiang Yanli lifted the lantern.

“I see you. You dropped your shoe under the tree.”

Wei Wuxian peeked down at his own left foot and exclaimed in shock, “My shoe!”

“Come on down,” Jiang Yanli coaxed. “Let’s go back, hmm?”

“I…I’m not coming down. There are dogs.”

“A-Cheng was fibbing. There are no dogs,” Jiang Yanli assured him. “There’s nowhere to sit up there. Your hands will start to ache soon and you’ll fall.”

No matter how she coaxed him, Wei Wuxian clung to the tree and refused to come down. Jiang Yanli was afraid he would fall, so she set the lantern under the tree and stood under it with both hands outstretched to catch him, not daring to leave. They remained at this impasse for an incense time, but finally, Wei Wuxian’s hands grew sore, and he slipped from the tree trunk and plummeted. Jiang Yanli hurried to catch him, but he still hit the ground with a thud. He tumbled a few times, then hugged his leg and wailed.

“My leg is broken!”

Jiang Yanli comforted him. “There, there. It’s not broken. It shouldn’t be sprained, either. Does it hurt? It’s all right. Don’t move. I’ll carry you back on my back.”

Still thinking about the dogs, Wei Wuxian whimpered. “The dogs…are they here…?”

“No. If they come, I’ll chase them away for you,” Jiang Yanli reassured him again, then collected Wei Wuxian’s shoe from under the tree. “Why did your shoe fall off? Do they not fit?”

Wei Wuxian held back his tears of pain and hurriedly shook his head. “No, they fit.”

In truth, they didn’t. They were a few sizes too big. But they were the first pair of shoes Jiang Fengmian had bought him and Wei Wuxian was too embarrassed to make him go to the trouble of buying another pair, so he didn’t mention that they were too big. Jiang Yanli helped him put on his shoes, then pressed down on the deflated tips.

“Well now, they *are* a little too big. I’ll alter them for you when we get back.”

This made Wei Wuxian uneasy to hear. He kept feeling like he’d done something wrong again. The most fearful thing about living under someone else’s roof was imposing on and inconveniencing one’s hosts.

Jiang Yanli hoisted him onto her back and hobbled her way home.

“A-Ying, no matter what A-Cheng said to you earlier, don’t hold it against him. He has a bad temper, and he’s usually playing all by himself at home. He loved those little puppies, so it broke his heart when daddy sent them away. He’s actually happy there’s now someone here to keep him company. You didn’t come back after you ran off, and he was worried something had happened to you, so he rushed to my room to shake me awake. That’s why I knew to come out looking for you.”

Jiang Yanli was only two or three years older than him at the time, making her about twelve or thirteen. She was clearly still a child herself, but she spoke as naturally as a little grown-up as she continued her efforts to comfort Wei Wuxian. She was petite, slim and delicate, and not very strong, causing her to occasionally stumble and have to stop to rearrange her grip on Wei Wuxian’s legs to keep him from sliding down as she carried him along. But Wei Wuxian felt incomparably safe as he lay on her back, even more so than when he sat on Jiang Fengmian’s arm.

All of a sudden, the sound of sobbing wafted to their ears, sailing on the night breeze. Jiang Yanli jolted with fright.

“What’s that sound? Did you hear that?”

Wei Wuxian pointed. “I heard it. It came from that pit!”

The two headed over to the pit and very cautiously craned their necks to look inside. A small figure was lying prone at the bottom. When he looked up, two streaks of tears stood out starkly on his otherwise mud-covered face.

“…Jiejie!” he sobbed.

Jiang Yanli breathed a sigh of relief. “A-Cheng, didn’t I tell you to call everyone so we could all search together?”

Jiang Cheng merely shook his head. He had waited for a while after Jiang Yanli left but couldn’t sit still and chased after her. But he hurried too carelessly, and he’d forgotten to bring along a lantern. Subsequently, he tripped midway through the journey and fell into a pit, scraping his head in the process.

Jiang Yanli pulled her younger brother out of the pit, then fished out her handkerchief and pressed it to his incessantly bleeding forehead. Jiang Cheng’s expression was dispirited as he sneaked a peek at Wei Wuxian with his dark-colored eyes.

“Is there something you haven’t said yet to Wei Ying?” Jiang Yanli prompted.

With the handkerchief pressed to his forehead, Jiang Cheng muttered, “…I’m sorry.”

“Help A-Ying take his mat and blanket back inside later, all right?” Jiang Yanli prompted further.

Jiang Cheng sniffled. “I already brought them back in.”

Both of them had injured their legs and couldn’t walk, and they were still a good distance away from Lotus Pier. With no other options, Jiang Yanli had to carry one on her back and the other in her arms. Both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng wrapped their arms around her neck. After only a few steps, she was so tired, she was panting hard.

“What am I to do with you two…?”

With tears still in their eyes, they pitifully hugged her neck even tighter.

In the end, she carried both her little brothers back to Lotus Pier, one step at a time. She gently woke up the physician to request that he bandage and treat Wei Wuxian’s and Jiang Cheng’s injuries, then sent him back after giving him profuse apologies and thanks.

As he looked at Wei Wuxian’s leg, Jiang Cheng seemed nervous. If the other sect disciples or servants were to find out about this matter, and if it made its way to Jiang Fengmian's ears… If Jiang Fengmian learned that Jiang Cheng had thrown out Wei Wuxian's mat and even made him hurt his leg, he'd definitely dislike Jiang Cheng even more. That was also why he hadn't dared tell anyone else earlier but chased after them himself.

Seeing how worried Jiang Cheng looked, Wei Wuxian took the initiative to reassure him. "Don't worry. I won't tell Jiang-shushu. This all happened because I had the sudden urge to go tree-climbing at night. That's how I got hurt."

Jiang Cheng breathed a sigh of relief at this. "You don't have to worry either," he vowed. "I'll help you chase away any dog we see from now on!"

Seeing them finally clear the air between them, Jiang Yanli happily said, "That's the way it should be."

After half a night of torment, both of them were hungry, so Jiang Yanli went to the kitchen and bustled around on tiptoe to warm a bowl of lotus root pork ribs soup for each of them.

The aroma lingered in Wei Wuxian's heart, never dissipating even to this day.

Now, he squatted in the courtyard and set the empty bowl on the ground. He gazed at the starry night sky for a while and smiled. His chance encounter with Lan Wangji on the streets of Yunmeng today had reminded him of many things that had happened back when he studied at the Cloud Recesses. He'd called out to Lan Wangji on a whim, initially thinking of leading the conversation in that direction, but Lan Wangji had reminded him that nothing was the same as it had been back then.

But he only needed to return to Lotus Pier, to the Jiang siblings, to have the illusion that nothing had changed at all.

Wei Wuxian suddenly felt the urge to find the tree he'd climbed back then.

He stood up and made his way out of Lotus Pier's grounds. The sect disciples he came across along the way bowed and nodded their heads at him respectfully. They were all unfamiliar faces. The ones he was familiar with—the shidi who were like a bunch of monkeys refusing to walk properly and the servants who would make funny faces and didn’t bow properly—were all long gone.

Past the drilling grounds and beyond Lotus Pier’s main gate was a wide and spacious dock. Regardless of the time of day, there were always vendors selling food here. A pot sizzled with oil, and aromas filled the air. Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but walk over and comment with a smile.

“Plenty of stuff today, huh?”

The vendor, too, said with a smile, “Wei-gongzi, want some? Consider it a gift from me. No need to put it on the tab.”

“Sure, I’ll take it,” Wei Wuxian accepted. “But put it on my tab, as usual.”

There was a person squatting beside the vendor, filthy from head to toe. Before Wei Wuxian approached, she was hugging her knees and shivering as though cold and exhausted. When she heard Wei Wuxian speak, however, her head abruptly shot up.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened.

“It’s you?!”

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

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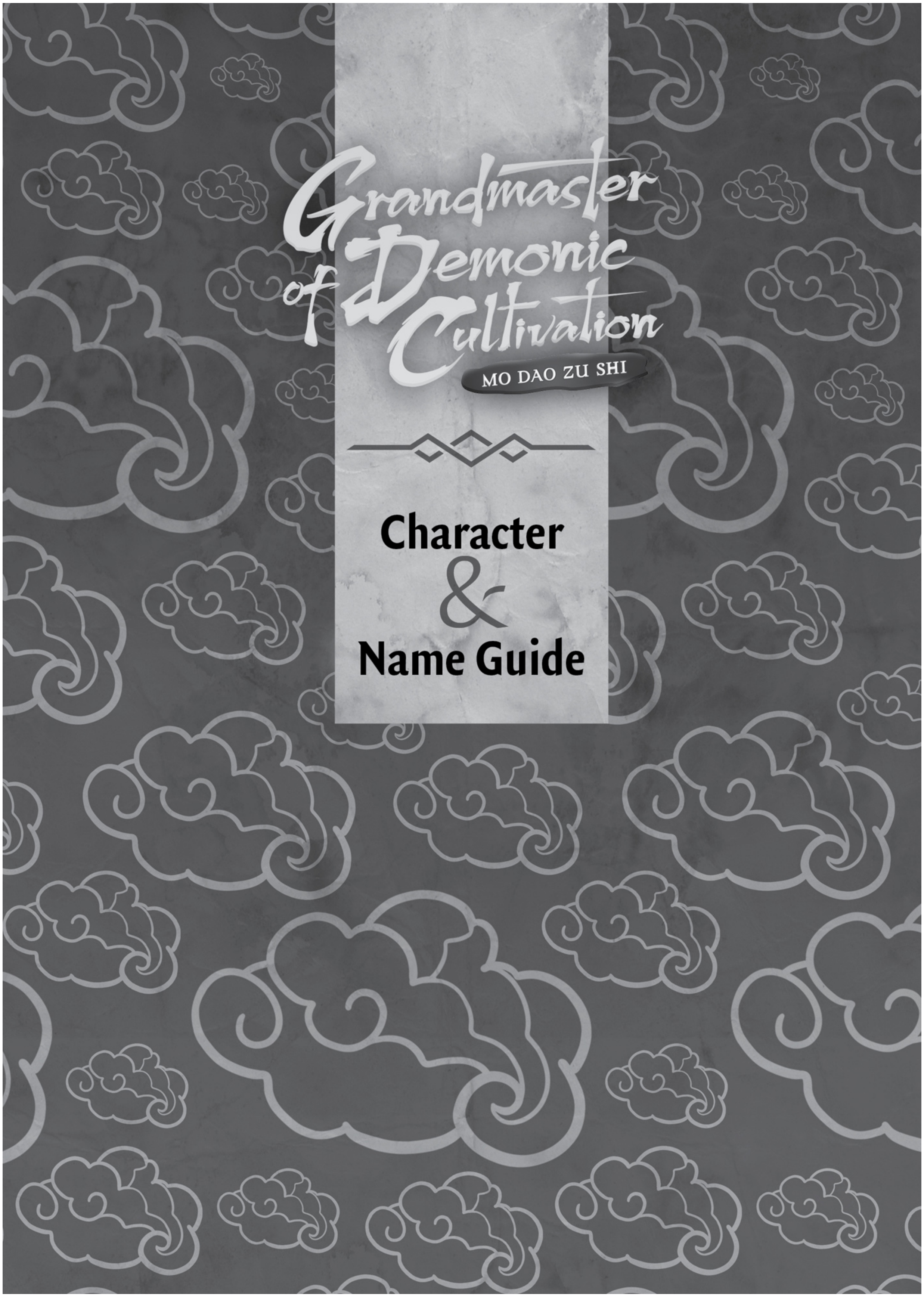

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Wei Wuxian

BIRTH NAME: Wei Ying (/ Surname Wei, “Infant”)

COURTESY NAME: Wei Wuxian (/ Surname Wei, “Having no envy”)

SOBRIQUET: Yiling Patriarch

WEAPON:

Sword: Suiban (/ “Whatever”)

Hufu/Tiger Tally: Yin Tiger Tally ( )

INSTRUMENT:

Dizi (side-blown flute): Chenqing (/ “To explain one’s situation in detail.” This is a reference to a line in a collection of poems, *Chu Ci* [ ], by famous poet Qu Yuan)

Unnamed dizi (side-blown flute)

In his previous life, Wei Wuxian was the feared Yiling Patriarch. He commanded an army of the living dead with his wicked flute Chenqing and laid waste to the cultivation world in an orgy of blood that eventually resulted in his death. Thirteen years later, a troubled young man sacrifices his soul to resurrect Wei Wuxian in his own body, hoping the terrible Yiling Patriarch will enact revenge on his behalf. Awakening confused and disoriented in this new body, Wei Wuxian stumbles forth into his second chance at life. Now, he must piece together the mystery surrounding his return—and face the lingering consequences of his last life, which continue to dog him even beyond death.

Wei Wuxian is mischievous and highly intelligent. He seems physically incapable of keeping his mouth shut and also can’t seem to stop himself from teasing people who catch his interest—with Lan Wangji being a perennial favorite target, even after thirteen years away from the land of the living. He has a soft spot for children and can often be found scolding junior disciples for endangering themselves during missions.

Lan Wangji

BIRTH NAME: Lan Zhan (/ “Blue,” “Clear” or “Deep”)

COURTESY NAME: Lan Wangji (/ “Blue,” “Free of worldly concerns”)

SOBRIQUET: Hanguang-jun (/ “Light-bringer,” honorific “-jun”)

WEAPON: Sword: Bichen (/ “Shunning worldly affairs”)

INSTRUMENT: Guqin (zither): Wangji (/ “Free of worldly concerns”)

Lan Wangji’s perfection as a cultivator is matched by none. Shunning petty politics and social prejudices, he appears wherever there is chaos to quell it with his sword Bichen, and evildoers quake in fear at the sound of strumming guqin strings. His remarkable grace and beauty have won him renown far and wide, even though his perpetual frown makes him look like a widower.

Younger brother to the current Lan Sect leader, Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji is stern, reserved, highly principled, and an avid fan of rabbits. While he was easily affected by teasing in his youth, he seems harder to perturb these days.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Baoshan-sanren

COURTESY NAME: Baoshan-sanren (/ “To embrace,” “Mountain,” “Scattered One”)

A mysterious immortal cultivator. She lives the life of a hermit on a secluded mountain, far removed from the chaos and pain of the outside world. She frequently takes in orphaned children to be brought up as cultivators under her tutelage and has but a single rule for her students to follow: If they ever choose to leave the mountain, they will never be allowed to return. She was the teacher of Xiao Xingchen and Cangse-sanren.

Cangse-sanren

COURTESY NAME: Cangse-sanren (/ “Hidden,” “Colors,” “Scattered One”)

A famous cultivator of remarkable skill and beauty who studied under Baoshan-sanren. Upon leaving her teacher’s secluded mountain, she fell in love with Wei Changze (/ Surname Wei, “Long-lasting” or “Large”, “Benevolence” or “Lake”), a servant boy from the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, and they ran away together. They eventually perished during a Night Hunt gone wrong, leaving behind their young son, Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng

BIRTH NAME: Jiang Cheng (/ “River,” “Clear”)

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Wanyin (/ “River,” “Night,” “Recitation”)

SOBRIQUET: Sandu Shengshou (/ “Three Poisons,” a reference to the Buddhist three roots of suffering: greed, anger, and ignorance, “Sage Hand”

WEAPON:

Whip: Zidian (/ “Purple,” “Lightning”)

Sword: Sandu (/ “Three Poisons”)

Jiang Cheng is the leader of the Jiang Sect and Jin Ling’s maternal uncle. Known to be stern and unrelenting, he possesses a longstanding grudge against Wei Wuxian even after the latter’s death. This is a far cry from the way things once were—Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian grew up together at Lotus Pier when the homeless and orphaned Wei Wuxian was taken in by Jiang Cheng’s father, and were the closest of friends as well as martial siblings. However, after Wei Wuxian’s rise as the Yiling Patriarch, their friendship ended alongside the many people who died at his hands…or so it seems.

Jiang Fengmian

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Fengmian (/ “River,” “Maple,” “To sleep”)

The former head of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, husband of Yu Ziyuan, and father of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng. Jiang Fengmian is a mild-mannered man who prefers keeping the peace. He is rumored to have been in unrequited love with Wei Wuxian’s mother, Cangse-sanren. He took in the orphaned Wei Wuxian and maintains a warm and fatherly relationship toward him. He treated Wei Wuxian with visibly more affection than his biological children, which further aggravated his already strained relationships with his wife and Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Yanli

BIRTH NAME: Jiang Yanli (/ “River,” “To dislike separation”)

WEAPON: Love, patience, soup

The eldest daughter of the Jiang Clan, older sister to Jiang Cheng, and older martial sister to Wei Wuxian. She is Jin Zixuan’s wife and Jin Ling’s mother, and is warmly remembered by Wei Wuxian as being unconditionally kind and caring—and also an amazing chef. Though she possessed weak cultivation and no talent for combat, Jiang Yanli’s boundless compassion touched the lives of many and changed the course of the cultivation world more profoundly than any bloody war ever could.

Yu Ziyuan

BIRTH NAME: Yu Ziyuan (/ “Apprehension” or “To worry,” “Purple,” “Kite [species of bird]”)

SOBRIQUET: Zi Zhizhu (/ “Purple Spider”)

WEAPON: Whip: Zidian (/ “Purple,” “Lightning”)

The wife of Jiang Fengmian and mother of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng. Originally from the Yu Clan of Meishan, she was a famous cultivator in her own right. She was a stern and unrelenting woman but loved her children deeply. That being said, she never warmed up to Wei Wuxian, the orphaned ward her husband brought home against her wishes. She was close with Madam Jin, and it was their lifelong friendship that prompted the arranged marriage of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan.

Madam Yu has two personal maidservants who serve as her right and left hands when it comes to sect matters, named Jinzhu (/ “Golden Bead”) and Yinzhu (/ “Silver Bead”). They are able to interpret their mistress’s commands without a single word being spoken.

Jin Ling

BIRTH NAME: Jin Ling (/ “Gold,” “Tower aloft”)

COURTESY NAME: Jin Rulan (/ “Gold,” “Like” or “As if,” “Orchid”)

WEAPON:

Sword: Suihua (/ “Passage of time”), previously owned by Jin Zixuan

Fairy (spirit dog)

Unnamed bow

The young heir to the Jin Clan and son of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. Jin Ling grew up a lonely child, bullied by his peers and overly doted on by his caretakers out of pity. Though Jin Ling remains quite spoiled and unmanageable in temperament, he strongly dislikes being looked down upon and seeks to prove himself as a cultivator. He is often seen squabbling with his maternal uncle and sometimes-caretaker Jiang Cheng or hurling himself headlong into mortal peril alongside his loyal spirit dog Fairy.

Jin Guangshan

COURTESY NAME: Jin Guangshan (/ “Gold,” “Light and glory,” “Kindness”)

The former Jin Sect head and father to Jin Zixuan, Jin Guangyao, Mo Xuanyu, and many, many more. He was a womanizer who would abandon his lovers just as quickly as he would any children born of his dalliances. Despite this ravenous appetite, he only sired one child (Jin Zixuan) with his lawful wife. Under his rule, the Jin Sect was loathed by the cultivation world for its shameless abuses, corruption, and excess. Thankfully, he eventually died of exhaustion during an orgy and was succeeded by Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao

BIRTH NAME: Meng Yao (/ “Eldest,” “Jade”)

COURTESY NAME: Jin Guangyao (/ “Gold,” “Light and glory,” “Jade”)

SOBRIQUET: Lianfang-zun (/ “Hidden fragrance,” honorific “-zun”)

WEAPON: Softsword: Hensheng (/ “To hate life/birth”)

INSTRUMENT: Unnamed guqin

The current Jin Sect leader. He is half siblings with Jin Zixuan, Mo Xuanyu, and countless other children born of Jin Guangshan’s wandering libido. He is also sworn brothers with Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue, and together, they are known as the Three Zun. He is particularly close to Lan Xichen and could easily be named the man’s most trusted companion. However, Jin Guangyao had a considerably more troubled relationship with Nie Mingjue before the man’s death, and they frequently had heated disagreements over their conflicting worldviews.

Jin Guangyao rose from humble circumstances and became not only the head of the Jin Sect but also the Cultivation Chief of the inter-sect alliance. His work as an undercover spy was instrumental in the success of the Sunshot Campaign. His skill at politicking and networking is matched by none, and through restructuring and reparations he was able to largely make up for the damage done to the Jin Sect's reputation by his father's rule.

Jin Zixuan

COURTESY NAME: Jin Zixuan (/ "Gold," common male prefix "Son," "Pavilion")

WEAPON: Sword: Suihua (/ "Passage of time")

The Jin Clan heir and the only legitimate son of Jin Guangshan. He married Jiang Yanli and together they had a son, Jin Ling. He attended school at the Cloud Recesses in his youth and was classmates with Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang. Due to his status, his natural skill, and his good looks, Jin Zixuan was generally rather prideful and arrogant, and was disliked by his peers.

He was initially resentful of his betrothal to Jiang Yanli, as it was arranged by his mother without his input or consent. However, he eventually began to regret his rude behavior and developed real feelings for her. Jiang Yanli seemed charmed by his earnest and extremely inept attempts to woo her, and the result was a brief but happy marriage.

Jin Zixun

COURTESY NAME: Jin Zixun (/ "Gold," common male prefix "Son," "Meritorious deed")

Jin Zixuan's younger paternal cousin. Like his cousin, he is arrogant and prideful regarding his appearance and skills, but unlike his cousin, these feelings do not have much basis in reality. Jin Zixun's cultivation level is unremarkable, and this coupled with his inability to keep a cool head often makes him a liability in tense situations.

Madam Jin

The lawful wife of Jin Guangshan and mother of Jin Zixuan. While her proper name is never revealed, her forceful personality is not so easily forgotten. She was close with Madam Yu, and it was their lifelong friendship that prompted the arranged marriage of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. She despises her husband’s constant philandering (as well as any reminders of it in the form of illegitimate children), and although he fears her wrath, it does not stop him from continuing apace. She is equally unamused by her son’s attitude problems and not afraid to reprimand him in public should the need arise.

Lan Jingyi

COURTESY NAME: Lan Jingyi (/ “Blue,” “Scenery,” “Bearing” or “Appearance”)

WEAPON: Unnamed sword

A junior disciple in the Lan Sect. He is close friends with Lan Sizhui and appears to have a special kind of admiration for Lan Wangji. Although he was raised in such a strict sect, Lan Jingyi is distinctly un-Lan-like in his mannerisms, being loud, bluntly honest, and easily worked up into a tizzy. That being said, like any Lan, he is still very quick to spot and accuse instances of rule-breaking on the Cloud Recesses’ premises.

Lan Qiren

COURTESY NAME: Lan Qiren (/ “Blue,” “Open” or “Awaken,” “Benevolence”)

WEAPON: Long lectures, closed-book exams

A Lan Clan elder and the paternal uncle of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. He is well known across the cultivation world as an exemplary (and extremely strict) teacher who consistently produces equally exemplary students. He loves his nephews deeply and is clearly extremely proud of their accomplishments and skill as cultivators and gentlemen both. However, he does not exclude them from the prescribed clan punishments on the rare occasion that such things are warranted. Lan Qiren saw how his older brother Qingheng-jun was ruined by love and is desperate to keep his nephews from making the same mistakes as their father.

Lan Sizhui

BIRTH NAME: Lan Yuan (/ “Blue,” “Wish”)

COURTESY NAME: Lan Sizhui (/ “Blue,” “To remember and long for”)

WEAPON: Unnamed sword

INSTRUMENT: Unnamed guqin

A junior disciple in the Lan Sect. He is close friends with Lan Jingyi and appears to have a special kind of admiration for Lan Wangji. Lan Sizhui is poised and quite mature for his age, and is a natural leader of his peers when the juniors are sent out on investigations. Although raised in such a strict sect, Lan Sizhui retains an air of warmth about him. He is kind, intuitive, and willing to see beyond surface appearances.

Lan Xichen

BIRTH NAME: Lan Huan (/ “Blue,” “Melt” or “Dissipate”)

COURTESY NAME: Lan Xichen (/ “Blue,” “Sunlight,” “Minister” or “Subject”)

SOBRIQUET: Zewu-jun (/ “Moss-shaded pool,” honorific “-jun”)

WEAPON: Sword: Shuoyue (/ “New moon”)

INSTRUMENT: Xiao (end-blown flute): Liebing (/ “Cracked,” “Ice”)

Unnamed guqin

The current Lan Sect head and Lan Wangji’s elder brother. He is also sworn brothers with Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue, and together they are known as the Three Zun.

Lan Xichen possesses a warm and gentle personality and can easily get along with anyone and everyone. He possesses the unique and curious ability to understand his reticent little brother at a glance. He is as calm and undisturbed as the shaded pool from which he takes his sobriquet and will lend an ear to anyone who approaches, whatever their social standing.

Qingheng-jun

BIRTH NAME: Qingheng-jun (/ “Green ginger,” honorific“-jun”)

Qingheng-jun was the former leader of the Lan Clan of Gusu and the father of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. That being said, the clan was actually managed by his younger brother Lan Qiren, as Qingheng-jun spent his days in seclusion.

Madam Lan

Madam Lan was the mother of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. Due to her rumored ill health, she lived in a small, secluded cottage away from the (relative) hustle and bustle of the Cloud Recesses proper. Her two sons were rarely permitted to visit her, but she seemed to love them dearly and showered them with affection when they came by.

Mianmian

SOBRIQUET: Mianmian (/ “Continuous”)

A young female cultivator from a minor clan. She is harassed by the lecherous Wen Chao when imprisoned at his clan’s training facilities, and this provokes the furious jealousy of Wang Lingjiao. As Wei Wuxian never wheedled her real name out of her during their brief meeting, she is known to him by her nickname only. He used this nickname to tease her flirtatiously by referencing the lady lead of a romantic folksong from the Han dynasty. The verse in question used is *Mianmian si yuandao*, “Unendingly do I long for [my husband].”

Mo Xuanyu

COURTESY NAME: Mo Xuanyu (/ “Nothing” or “There is none who,” “Mysterious” or “Black,” “Feathers”)

The young man who offered up his own body to bring Wei Wuxian back into the land of the living at a most horrible price: the obliteration of his own soul. He is one of the many illegitimate sons of Jin Guangshan. After he was expelled from the Jin Sect, the humiliation took a dreadful toll on his mind. He endured years of relentless abuse by the Mo household and eventually turned to demonic cultivation to exact revenge on those who tormented him. With his soul destroyed, Mo Xuanyu himself is now but a memory, and Wei Wuxian inhabits his body.

Nie Huaisang

COURTESY NAME: Nie Huaisang (/ “Whisper,” “Cherish,” “Mulberry”)

SOBRIQUET: Head-Shaker (/ “One Question, Three Don’t-Knows”)

WEAPON:

Unnamed saber (ostensibly)

Crying (actually)

The current Nie Sect head and Nie Mingjue’s younger half brother. When they were young, he attended school at the Cloud Recesses with Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng. Nie Huaisang is a dilettante dandy who possesses a passionate love of fashion and the arts, but unfortunately possesses no such innate genius for politics or management. He is frequently seen looking stricken and panicked, and largely relies on the compassion and assistance of his older brother’s sworn brothers (Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao) to keep the Nie Sect struggling along.

Nie Mingjue

COURTESY NAME: Nie Mingjue (/ “Whisper,” “Bright” or “Righteousness,” “Jade ring”)

SOBRIQUET: Chifeng-zun (/ “Crimson Blade,” honorific “-zun”)

WEAPON: Saber: Baxia (/ “To be ruled by force,” also the name of one of the mythical Dragon King’s nine sons.)

The former Nie Sect head and Nie Huaisang's older half brother. He is also sworn brothers with Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao, and together they are known as the Three Zun. Nie Mingjue was a fierce man who was quick to use violence as a solution. He was unable to tolerate injustice or underhanded behavior, and was fearless in calling out even those in the highest seats of power. Unfortunately, his temperament eventually got the better of him, and he died at a young age from a qi deviation.

Ouyang Zizhen

BIRTH NAME: Ouyang Zizhen (/ Surname Ouyang, common male prefix "Son," "Genuine," "Truth")

WEAPON: A sentimental heart

One of the junior disciples who was rescued by Wei Wuxian as they found themselves lost in Yi City's fog. He is described by Wei Wuxian as having a sentimental outlook on the world. Ouyang Zizhen does not forget the kind deeds others have done for him, and he will not hesitate to stand up to defend a friend even in the face of an army.

Wang Lingjiao

BIRTH NAME: Wang Lingjiao (/ "King" or "Monarch", "Spirit" or "Clever", "Delicate")

Wen Chao's (current) paramour. She is arrogant, cruel, and quick to take offense at any perceived slights—truly, she and Wen Chao would be a match made in heaven if Wen Chao could ever manage to remain faithful to a woman for longer than six months. She was originally a servant girl who attended Wen Chao's lawful wife, but her beauty caught Wen Chao's ever-wandering eye. Being his mistress comes with perks, such as being permitted to form her own sect—the Wang Clan of Yingchuan—and being given free reign to terrorize the members of other more legitimate sects.

Wen Chao

COURTESY NAME: Wen Chao (/ "Mild" or "Warm," Surname Chao [being used as a given name] or "Morning")

WEAPON: Bigger, stronger people to hide behind

The youngest son of Wen Ruohan. Wen Chao is a greasy, sadistic coward whose arrogance is only exceeded by his lack of any qualifying talents. Although he has a lawful wife, that hardly stops him from taking on a new mistress every six months and harassing every attractive woman he comes across. Wang Lingjiao is his current paramour, and their wretched personalities are well suited for each other. He is heavily reliant on Wen Zhuliu’s abilities as a bodyguard to keep himself alive but often abuses the man’s loyalty to his father by ordering him to inflict senseless acts of cruelty.

Wen Ning

BIRTH NAME: Wen Ning (/ “Mild” or “Warm,” “Peaceful”)

COURTESY NAME: Wen Qionglin (/ “Mild” or “Warm,” “Beautiful” or “Fine jade,” “Forest”)

SOBRIQUET: Ghost General ( )

WEAPON: Fists, feet, and metal chains

A fierce corpse known as the Ghost General. One of the Yiling Patriarch’s finest creations, Wen Ning retains his mind and personality. Coupled with the strength to crush steel to dust with his bare fists, it is no wonder that he was once Wei Wuxian’s right-hand man.

Wen Ning wasn’t always so powerful, nor always so dead. In life, he served under the Wen Clan as the leader of a minor squadron. His compassion and meekness were always at odds with the orders passed down from on high, and he also suffered from a minor stutter. Despite the lack of respect from his peers, he maintained his position in the Wen Clan due to family ties. He is the beloved younger brother of the Wen Clan’s most famous doctor, Wen Qing, and the son of Wen Ruohan’s cousin.

Wen Qing

COURTESY NAME: Wen Qing (/ “Mild” or “Warm,” “Sentiment”; taken as a single word means “Tenderness”)

WEAPON: A steady hand and an endless supply of acupuncture needles

A famous and highly decorated doctor and a member of the Wen Clan. She has a no-nonsense personality and a decided lack of bedside manner. Although she can come across as arrogant, no one in the cultivation world could deny that her abilities are truly exceptional. Wen Qing is the daughter of Wen Ruohan's maternal cousin and is a personal favorite of the mad tyrant himself. While she does not share her relative's taste for cruelty, she doesn't consider it something she needs to personally concern herself with—after all, her prime directive is to ensure the survival of her beloved younger brother, Wen Ning, at all costs.

Wen Ruohan

COURTESY NAME: Wen Ruohan (/ "Mild" or "Warm," "As though," "Cold" or "Tremble")

The leader of the Wen Clan of Qishan and an immensely powerful cultivator. He is cruel and power-hungry, and will stop at nothing to ensure that the Wen Clan crushes all other clans beneath its heel. He has an extensive collection of torture devices and does not hesitate to use them to toy with his victims until death releases them.

Wen Zhuliu

BIRTH NAME: Zhao Zhuliu (/ Surname Zhao, "To pursue/chase," "Flow" or "Current")

COURTESY NAME: Wen Zhuliu (/ "Mild" or "Warm," "To pursue/chase," "Flow" or "Current")

SOBRIQUET: Core-Melting Hand ( )

WEAPON: His core-melting hand

A powerful cultivator in the Wen Clan and the bodyguard of Wen Chao. He is devotedly loyal to Wen Ruohan and adopted the Wen family name as a show of fealty. He is a stoic man who speaks little and rarely, and does not exhibit the gleeful sadism that Wen Ruohan and his children possess. He clearly dislikes Wen Chao and his vile, arrogant personality but carries out his bodyguarding duties out of debt to Wen Ruohan.

Wen Zhuliu has the terrifying ability to destroy a cultivator’s golden core with his bare hands. Once their golden core is destroyed, a cultivator can cultivate no more.

Fairy

WEAPON: Claws, jaws, and the only brain in the room (usually)

INSTRUMENT: Woof!

Jin Ling’s loyal spirit dog. As a spirit dog, Fairy possesses intelligence of a level above the average canine and can detect supernatural beings. Regarding the pup’s name, “Fairy” could refer to the Chinese *xianzi* ( ), a female celestial being, but it is also a common way to describe a woman with ethereal, otherworldly beauty. That being said, Fairy’s gender is never specified in the text.

Little Apple

WEAPON: Hooves, teeth, and raw fury

A spotted donkey that Wei Wuxian stole from Mo Manor as he made his escape after the ghost arm incident. Little Apple is imperious, hard to please, and very temperamental; however, it possesses a strong sense of justice and a heart brave enough to put even the most renown cultivators to shame. It also really loves apples. Little Apple’s gender is never specified in the text.

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Locations

HUBEI

Burial Mounds ( )

A foreboding mountainous ridge located near Yiling. It is said to be the spot where an ancient and most terrible battle was waged. It is heavily ravaged by resentful energy and packed to the brim with walking corpses and vengeful ghosts. It has proven to be extremely resistant to any attempts at purification from top cultivation sects, and as such it was sealed off with magical barriers and written off as a lost cause. That is, until the dreaded Yiling Patriarch claimed it as his base of operations.

Lotus Pier ( )

The residence of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, located on the shores of a vast lake rich with blooming lotuses. The picturesque scenery is a perfect setting for a myriad of outdoor activities, such as boating, kite-flying, and playfully roughhousing with one’s martial siblings.

Lotus Pier is always bustling with cultivators and common folk alike, which is in stark contrast to other sects. Merchants line the piers to hawk food and wares, and local children scamper about to gawk in awe as the disciples of the Jiang Sect do their daily training.

Yiling ( )

An area located near Yunmeng. While Yiling itself is bustling with life, it is most infamous for its proximity to the Burial Mounds.

Yunmeng ( )

A county in the Hubei area. Its many lakes and waterways make it a prime juncture point for trade.

JIANGNAN

Cloud Recesses ( )

The residence of the Lan Clan of Gusu, located on a remote mountaintop. The Cloud Recesses is a tranquil place constantly shrouded in mist. Beside the entrance there looms the Wall of Discipline, carved with the three thousand (later four thousand) rules of the Lan Clan.

The Cloud Recesses is home to the Library Pavilion where many rare and ancient texts are housed, the Tranquility Room where Lan Wangji resides, and the Orchid Room where Lan Qiren hosts lectures. There is also the Nether Room, a tower in which spirit-summoning rituals are performed, as well as a cold spring for bathing. On the back of the mountain is a secluded meadow where Lan Wangji keeps his pet rabbits.

The Cloud Recesses' name translates more literally to "Somewhere Hidden in Clouds" ( ) and is a reference to a line in the poem "Failing to Find the Hermit," by Jia Dao:

I asked the young disciple beneath the pine;
"My master is gone to pick herbs," he answered.
"Though within this mountain he is,
The recesses of clouds hide his trail."

Gusu ( )

A city in the Jiangnan region. Jiangnan is famous for its rich, fertile land and its abundant agricultural goods. Its hazy, drizzling weather and the soft sweet dialect make it a popular setting in Chinese romance literature.

HEBEI

Qinghe ( )

A county in the Hebei region. Qinghe is the home territory of the Nie Clan and is where their residence is located.

Impure Realm ( )

The residence of the Nie Clan of Qinghe. Its name may be a reference to Patikulamanasikara (in Chinese, written as / Impure View), a set of Buddhist sutras meant to help overcome mortal desires. It thus serves both as a goal for the Nie Clan to aspire to and a reminder of their background as butchers.

SHAANXI

Qishan ( )

A county in the Shaanxi region. Qishan is the home territory of the Wen Clan and is where their residence is located.

Nightless City ( )

The residence of the Wen Clan of Qishan. Its name is derived from the fact that the expansive complex is vast enough to be comparable to the size of a city, as well as the brazen declaration of the Wen Clan that the sun never sets upon their domain—since it is their clan crest. The Scorching Sun Palace is the seat of Wen Ruohan’s power, and the Inferno Palace is where he stores and demonstrates his vast collection of torture devices on unlucky guests.

Mount Muxi ( )

A mountain in Wen Clan territory. Streams criss-cross the forested landscape. Surrounded by red maple trees and the gentle sound of flowing water, it’s a perfect spot for observing the local wildlife, and you might even wind up being inspired to compose a song for the one you love.

SHANDONG

Lanling ( )

A county in the Shandong region.

Golden Carp Tower ( )

The residence of the Jin Clan of Lanling, located at the heart of the city of Lanling. The main road to the tower is only opened when events are being hosted, and this grand avenue is lavishly decorated with murals and statuary. Upon reaching the tower base, travelers must scale the numerous levels of steep staircases that lead to the tower proper. These staircases are a reference to the legend from which Golden Carp Tower derives its name—it is said that if an ordinary carp is able to leap to the top of a waterfall, it can turn into a glorious dragon.

Once the arduous journey to the top is complete, one will find themselves overlooking the city of Lanling from on high and vast gardens of the Jin Clan of Lanling’s signature flower: the cultivar peony, Sparks Amidst Snow. The Jin Sect’s wealth and influence, as well as current leader Jin Guangyao’s position as Cultivation Chief, sees Golden Carp Tower hosting frequent symposiums and banquets with VIP guests from the cultivation world’s most powerful sects.

MISCELLANEOUS

Dongying ( )

The name used for the country of Japan in ancient China.

Mount Baifeng ( )

A densely forested mountain that is a popular spot for Siege Hunts due to its large endemic population of monsters and demons—so popular, in fact, that large hunting competitions are often hosted there. Cultivators and non-cultivators alike flock to these contests to spectate from the luxury (and safety) of observation towers. If you find yourself among those cheering crowds, toss a flower to your favorite hero before they ride off to the hunt. Perhaps they’ll spare you a glance, or if you’re lucky, return the favor by surprising you with a kiss.

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Name Guide

Courtesy Names

A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's birth name was reserved for only elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, characters as young as fifteen years of age are referred to only by their courtesy names, while traditionally they would not have been permitted to use them until the age of twenty.

Sobriquet

The term used in this translation for *hao* ( ). Hao can also be translated as "art name." These names are generally chosen by an individual for themselves, but they can also be bestowed upon them in light of their accomplishments or traits. They were often used as pen names or respectful titles for scholars, government officials, or martial heroes. They could be derived from a number of possible subjects, including their place of birth, a poetic quote, a feat that the person in question was famous for, and more.

Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

LAO-: A diminutive meaning “old.”

-ER: A word for “son” or “child.” Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone “Little” or “Sonny.”

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

EXAMPLE: A-Qing, A-Yuan, A-Xian (For Wei Wuxian)

Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

EXAMPLE: Xianxian (for Wei Wuxian, referring to himself).

Family

BOMU: Aunt (non-biological, wife of father’s elder brother).

DI: Younger brother or younger male friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

XIAO-DI: Does not mean “little brother”, and instead refers to one’s lackey or subordinate, someone a leader took under their wings.

GE: Older brother or older male friend.

GEGE: Older brother or an older male friend. Casual and has a cutesier feel than “ge,” so it can be used in a flirtatious manner.

JIE: Older sister or older female friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

JIEJIE: Older sister or an unrelated older female friend. Casual.

JIUJIU: Uncle (maternal, biological).

MEI: Younger sister or younger female friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

SHUFU: Uncle (paternal, biological) Formal address for one's father's younger brother.

SHUSHU: An affectionate version of "Shufu."

XIAO-SHU OR XIAO-SHUSHU: Little (paternal) uncle; affectionate.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

XIONGZHANG: Eldest brother. Very formal, blood related-only.

XIANSHENG: Historically "teacher," but modern usage is "Mister." Also an affectionate way for wives to refer to their husband.

If multiple relatives in the same category are present (multiple older brothers, for example), everyone is assigned a number in order of birthdate, starting with the eldest as number one, the second oldest as number two, etc. These numbers are then used to differentiate one person from another. This goes for all of the categories above, whether it's siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and so on.

EXAMPLES: If you have three older brothers, the oldest would be referred to as "da-ge," the second oldest "er-ge," and the third oldest "san-ge." If you have two younger brothers you (as the oldest) would be number one. Your second-youngest brother would be "er-di," and the youngest of your two younger brothers would be "san-di."

Cultivation and Martial Arts

GENERAL

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household

-JUN: A suffix meaning “lord.”

-QIANBEI: A respectful suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

-ZUN: A suffix meaning “esteemed, venerable.” More respectful than “-jun.”

SECTS

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect.

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun, but has a slightly less formal feel.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one’s own sect.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one’s own sect.

SHINIANG: The wife of a shifu/shizun.

SHISHU: The younger martial sibling of one’s master. Can be male or female.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect.

SHIZUN: Honorific address (as opposed to shifu) of one’s teacher/master.

Cultivators and Immortals

DAOREN: “Cultivator.”

DAOZHANG: A polite address for cultivators. Equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s name

EXAMPLE: referring to Xiao Xingchen as “Daozhang” or “Xiao Xingchen-daozhang.”

SANREN: “Scattered One.” For cultivators/immortals who are not tied to a specific sect.

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

en jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh

DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon

-JŪN: june

DÌDÌ: dee-dee

GĒGĒ: guh-guh

JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay

MÈIMEI: may-may

-XIÓNG: shong

Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may

WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah

XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah

QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)

Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)

C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)

IU: yoh

UO: wuh

ZHI: jrr

CHI: chrr

SHI: shrr

RI: rrr

ZI: zzz

CI: tsz

SI: SSZ

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.

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Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (/ “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (/ “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (/ “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story’s central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

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TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: A Daoist concept, ascension refers to the process of a person gaining enlightenment through cultivation, whereupon they shed their mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world. In most xianxia, gods are distinct from immortals in that gods are conceived naturally and born divine, while immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity.

BOWING: As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

BUDDHISM: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

CLANS: Cultivation clans are large blood-related families that share a surname. Clans are led by family elders, and while only family members can be leaders, disciples can join regardless of blood relation. They may eventually take on the family name, depending on whether the family chooses to offer it. This could be accomplished via adoption or marriage. Clans tend to have a signature cultivation or martial art that is passed down through generations along with ancestral magical artifacts and weapons.

Colors

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the Dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth and prosperity, and often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one’s elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (/ “filial piety”). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

CORES/GOLDEN CORES: The formation of a jindan (/ “golden core”) is a key step in any cultivator’s journey to immortality. The Golden Core forms within the lower *dantian*, becoming an internal source of power for the cultivator. Golden Core formation is only accomplished after a great deal of intense training and qi cultivation.

Cultivators can detonate their Golden Core as a last-ditch move to take out a dangerous opponent, but this almost always kills the cultivator. A core’s destruction or removal is permanent. In almost all instances, it cannot be re-cultivated. Its destruction also prevents the individual from ever being able to process or cultivate qi normally again.

COURTESY NAMES: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (See Name Guide for more information.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also attaining personal strength and expanding their life span.

Cultivation is a long process marked by “stages.” There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

- Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (/)
- Foundation Establishment ( )
- Core Formation/Golden Core (/)
- Nascent Soul ( )
- Deity Transformation ( )
- Great Ascension ( )
- Heavenly Tribulation ( )

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret/advanced training technique, and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is something being marked with a price of “one *liang* of silver.”

CUT-SLEEVE: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor’s love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his sleeve. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his sleeve.

DANTIAN: *Dantian* (/ “cinnabar field”) refers to three regions in the body where qi is concentrated and refined. The Lower is located three finger widths below and two finger widths behind the navel. This is where a cultivator’s golden core would be formed and is where the qi metabolism process begins and progresses upward. The Middle is located at the center of the chest, at level with the heart, while the Upper is located on the forehead, between the eyebrows.

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *Dao* (/ “the way”) Following the Dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and able to affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil. Evil-aligned cultivators who seek power are said to follow the demonic cultivation path.

DISCIPLES: Clan and sect juniors are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into Core, Inner, and Outer rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

For non-clan members, when formally joining a sect as a disciple, the sect becomes like the disciple’s new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one’s sect is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DIVINE BEASTS: Refers to the four holy beasts that are considered guardians of the cardinal directions, as well as their associated seasons / elements.

AZURE DRAGON: (/ *Qinglong*) Associated with the cardinal direction of east and the season of spring.

VERMILION BIRD: (/ *Zhuque*): Associated with the cardinal direction of south and the season of summer.

WHITE TIGER: (/ *Baihu*): Associated with the cardinal direction of west and the season of autumn.

BLACK TORTOISE: (/ *Xuanwu*): Associated with the cardinal direction of north and the season of winter.

DIZI: A flute held horizontally. They are considered an instrument for commoners, as they are easy to craft from bamboo or wood.

FACE: *Mianzi* ( ), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FAIRY/XIANZI: A term commonly used in novels to describe a woman possessing ethereal, heavenly beauty. *Xianzi* is the female counterpart to *xianren* ("immortal"), and is also used to describe celestials that have descended from heaven.

FENG SHUI: *Feng shui* (/ "wind-water") is a Daoist practice centered around the philosophy of achieving spiritual accord between people, objects, and the universe at large. Practitioners usually focus on positioning and orientation, believing this can optimize the flow of qi in their environment. Having good feng shui means being in harmony with the natural order.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (/ "Five Phases"). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

Wood (/ mu)
Fire (/ huo)
Earth (/ tu)
Metal (/ jin)
Water (/ shui)

Flower Symbolism

LOTUS: Associated with Buddhism. It rises untainted from the muddy waters it grows in, and thus symbolizes ultimate purity of the heart and mind.

PEONY: Symbolizes wealth and power. Was considered the “emperor” of flowers. Sparks Amidst Snow, the signature flower of the Jin Clan of Lanling in Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, is based on the real-life Paeonia suffruticosa cultivar ( ).

PINE (TREE): A symbol of evergreen sentiment / everlasting affection.

WILLOW (TREE): A symbol of lasting affection and friendship. Also a symbol of farewell and can mean “urging someone to stay.”

FUNERALS: Daoist or Buddhist funerals generally last for forty-nine days. During the funeral ceremony, mourners can present the deceased with offerings of food, incense, and joss paper. If deceased ancestors have no patrilineal descendants to give them offerings, they may starve in the afterlife and become hungry ghosts. Wiping out a whole family is punishment for more than just the living.

After the funeral, the coffin is nailed shut and sealed with paper talismans to protect the body from evil spirits. The deceased is transported in a procession to their final resting place, often accompanied by loud music to scare off evil spirits. Cemeteries are usually on hillsides; the higher a grave is located, the better the feng shui. The traditional mourning color is white.

GHOST: Ghosts ( ) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

GOLDEN CROW: A Golden Crow ( )—also known as Three-legged Crow ( )—is a tripedal crow that is often used to represent the sun. A myth explains that there were once ten of these crows, which nested in the Valley of the Sun and came out one at a time to cross the sky. One day they all came out at once and began to cause chaos, causing the world to burn. The divine archer Houyi shot down nine of the ten crows to save humanity. This myth is directly referenced in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* as the meaning behind the name of the Sunshot Campaign.

GUQIN: A seven-stringed zither, played by plucking with the fingers. Sometimes called a qin. It is fairly large and is meant to be laid flat on a surface or on one’s lap while playing.

HAND GESTURES: The *baoquan* (/ “hold fist”) is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The *gongshou* (/ “arch hand”) is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES OR CABLES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes. When referenced in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, a single incense time is usually about thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person’s skin is described as “the color of jade.”

JIAO: A *Jiao* ( ), or *Jiaolong* ( ), is a species of mythological aquatic creatures. They are similar to but lesser than dragons; they cannot fly and do not have horns. They are commonly described as having scales and are found in fresh water. If they live for one thousand years, they can become dragons and migrate to the sea. Legends of jiaolong may have been originally born from crocodile sightings.

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

Numbers

TWO: Two (/ "er") is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom "good things come in pairs." It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (/ "san") sounds like *sheng* (/ "living") and also like san (/ "separation").

FOUR: Four (/ "si") sounds like *si* (/ "death"). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (/ "qi") sounds like *qi* (/ "together"), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (/ "deception").

EIGHT: Eight (/ "ba") sounds like *fa* (/ "prosperity"), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (/ "jiu") is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX's work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege ("second brother Lan") as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang ("third youth") when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PAPER EFFIGIES: *Zhizha* ( ) is a form of Daoist paper craft. Zhizha effigies can be used in place of living sacrifices to one's ancestors in the afterlife, or to gods. Joss paper can be considered a form of zhizha specifically for the deceased, though unlike zhizha, it is not specifically Daoist in nature.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one’s existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

QI: *Qi* ( ) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QI DEVIATION: A qi deviation (/ “to catch fire and enter demonhood”) occurs when one’s cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and devils.

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms such as leaping to one’s death to escape a hallucination. Common treatments of qi deviation in fiction include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

QIANKUN: (/ “universe”) Common tools used in fantasy novels. The primary function of these magical items is to provide unlimited storage space. Examples include pouches, the sleeve of a robe, magical jewelry, a weapon, and more.

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: ( ) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be “bleeding from the seven apertures.”

SHICHEN: Days were split into twelve intervals of two hours apiece called *shichen* (/ “time”). Each of these shichen has an associated term. Pre-Han dynasty used semi-descriptive terms, but in Post-Han dynasty, the shichen were renamed to correspond to the twelve zodiac animals.

ZI, MIDNIGHT: 11pm - 1am

CHOU: 1am - 3am

YIN: 3am - 5am

MAO, SUNRISE: 5am - 7am

CHEN: 7am - 9am

SI: 9am - 11am

WU, NOON: 11am - 1pm

WEI: 1pm - 3pm

SHEN: 3pm - 5pm

YOU, SUNSET: 5pm - 7pm

XU, DUSK: 7pm - 9pm

HAI: 9pm - 11pm

SHIDI, SHIXIONG, SHIZUN, ETC.: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person’s role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. (See Name Guide for more information.)

THE SIX ARTS: Six disciplines that any well-bred gentleman in Ancient China was expected to be learned in. The Six Arts were: Rites, Music, Archery, Chariotry or Equestrianism, Calligraphy, and Mathematics.

SPIRIT-ATTRACTION FLAG: A banner or flag intended to guide spirits. Can be hung from a building or tree to mark a location or carried around on a staff.

SWORDS: A cultivator’s sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed to them by their master, a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: *Jianguang* (/ “sword light”), an energy attack released from a sword’s edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals. Such a pact can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other’s families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc. Sworn siblings will refer to themselves as brother or sister, but this is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with incantations written on them, often done so with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

TIGER TALLY: A *hufu* (/ “tiger tally”), was used by Ancient Chinese emperors to signal their approval to dispatch troops in battle. A hufu was in two parts: one in the possession of the emperor, and the other in the possession of a general in the field. To signal approval, the emperor would send his half of the hufu to the general. If the two sides matched, troops would advance.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool, but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them, and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YAO: Animals, plants, or objects that have gained spiritual consciousness due to prolonged absorption of qi. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao. Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the cores they develop can be harvested by human cultivators to increase their own abilities.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

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Footnotes

1. A tiangou [ ] is a mythological creature that resembles a black dog. It is thought to eat the sun or moon during solar or lunar eclipses.

2. Refers to the Four Great Grudges/Hatreds of ancient times. The Great Grudges are: murder of one’s father (not by patricide), robbery of one’s wife, annihilation of one’s country, and slaughter of one’s clan. A son will not have fulfilled his proper duty until the wrong is avenged, even at the cost of his life.

3. “The barbarian speaks of the eight paths [of dao]” is an idiom used to accuse someone of speaking nonsense.

4. “Wangba-dan” literally means “tortoise egg” but is also slang for “bastard.”

5. The original Chinese for this book’s title uses the term “po” for “spirit.” In Chinese philosophy, every living human has two types of soul. The hun ( ) soul is associated with yang energy and leaves the body after death. The po ( ) soul is associated with yin energy and remains with the body of the deceased.

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About the Author

"A young superstitious girl,
renowned poster of memes;
a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;
and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.
...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.

...No, no, no, that's even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone
who writes.

Yep."

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official's Blessing*. All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.

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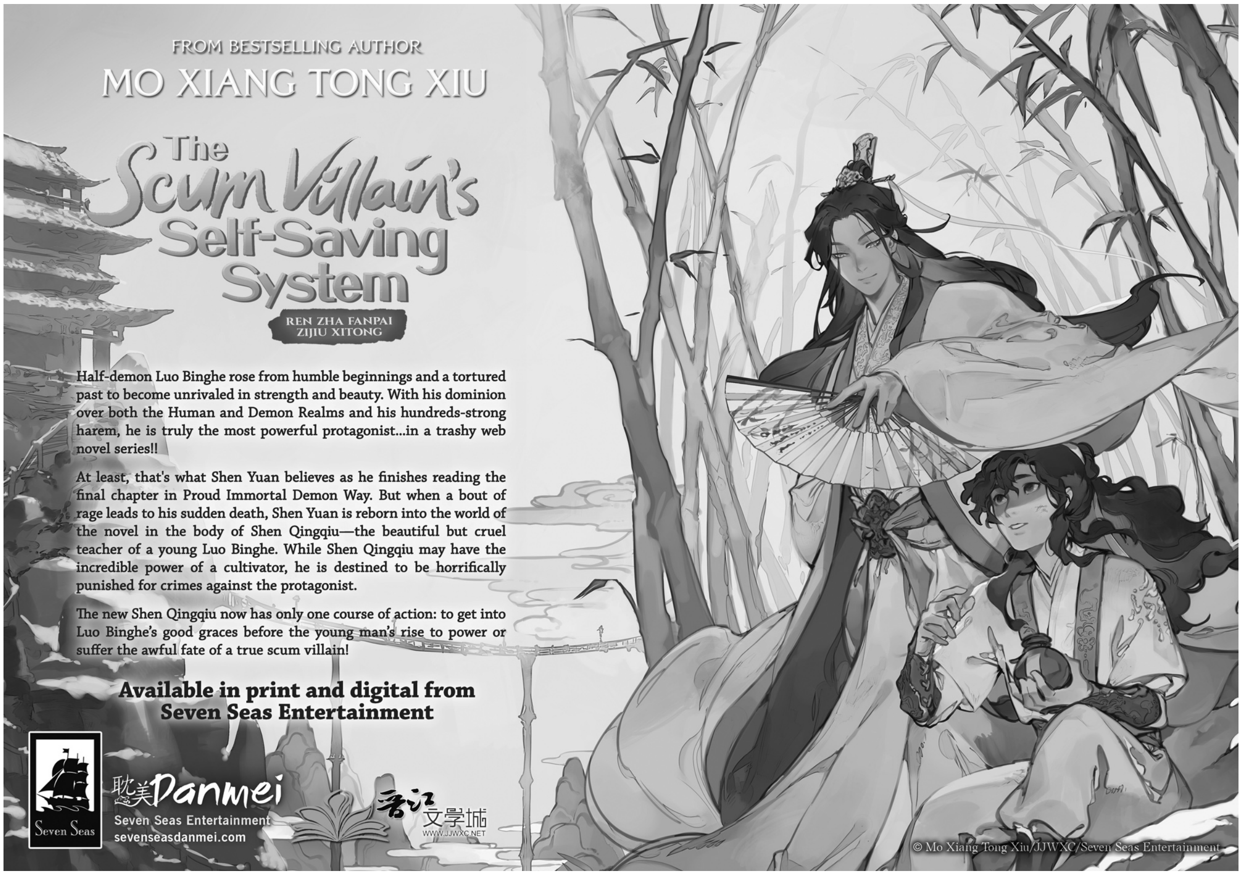

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System
REN ZHA FANPAI ZIJIU XITONG

Half-demon Luo Binghe rose from humble beginnings and a tortured past to become unrivaled in strength and beauty. With his dominion over both the Human and Demon Realms and his hundreds-strong harem, he is truly the most powerful protagonist...in a trashy web novel series!!

At least, that's what Shen Yuan believes as he finishes reading the final chapter in Proud Immortal Demon Way. But when a bout of rage leads to his sudden death, Shen Yuan is reborn into the world of the novel in the body of Shen Qingqiu—the beautiful but cruel teacher of a young Luo Binghe. While Shen Qingqiu may have the incredible power of a cultivator, he is destined to be horrifically punished for crimes against the protagonist.

The new Shen Qingqiu now has only one course of action: to get into Luo Binghe's good graces before the young man's rise to power or suffer the awful fate of a true scum villain!

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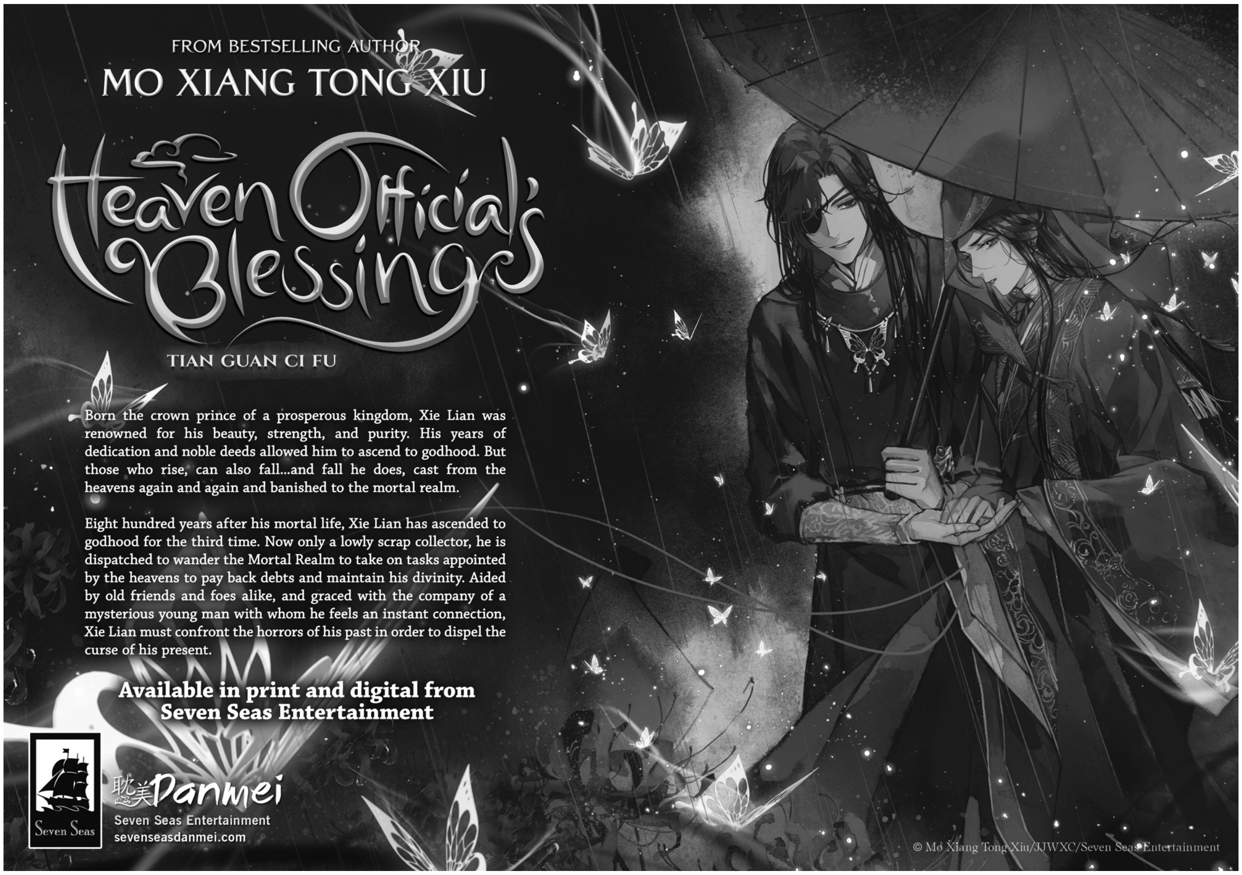

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing
TIAN GUAN CI FU

Born the crown prince of a prosperous kingdom, Xie Lian was renowned for his beauty, strength, and purity. His years of dedication and noble deeds allowed him to ascend to godhood. But those who rise, can also fall...and fall he does, cast from the heavens again and again and banished to the mortal realm.

Eight hundred years after his mortal life, Xie Lian has ascended to godhood for the third time. Now only a lowly scrap collector, he is dispatched to wander the Mortal Realm to take on tasks appointed by the heavens to pay back debts and maintain his divinity. Aided by old friends and foes alike, and graced with the company of a mysterious young man with whom he feels an instant connection, Xie Lian must confront the horrors of his past in order to dispel the curse of his present.

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RATED 17+

Shoot Down the Sun

The bloody war against the Wen Clan once led Wei Wuxian to seek power in demonic cultivation, and the dark acts he committed drove a wedge between him and Lan Wangji. Now, those old sins come back to haunt him as his reincarnated identity is revealed to the cultivation world. But even as the other clans call for Wei Wuxian's death, Lan Wangji stands by him, making Wei Wuxian realize what he took for disapproval in the past might have been a much deeper emotion.

The novel series that inspired
the live-action drama,
The Untamed!

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